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## Spirit, discipleship, community : the contemporary significance of Anabaptist hermeneutics

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SPIRIT, DISCIPLESHIP, COMMUNITY

THE CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE OF ANABAPTIST HERMENEUTICS

STUART WOOD MURRAY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of the Council for National Academic Awards  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

March 1994  
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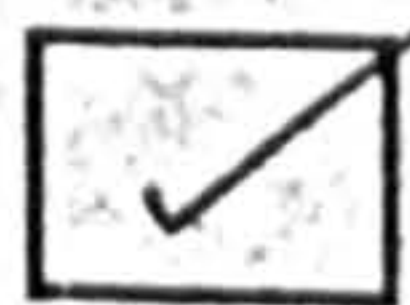
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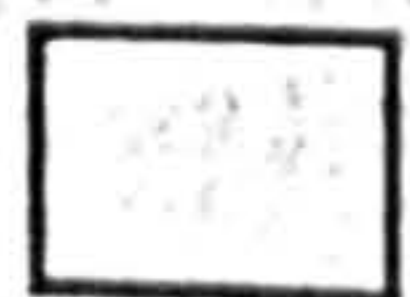
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## SUMMARY OF THESIS

The objectives of this thesis are twofold: to undertake a comprehensive survey of the hermeneutics of early Anabaptism (1525-1560) in order to clarify the principles operating within this movement and to distinguish Anabaptist hermeneutics from other sixteenth century systems of biblical interpretation; and, on the basis of this survey, to explore ways in which Anabaptist hermeneutics might contribute to contemporary hermeneutical developments.

Anabaptist hermeneutics offered a coherent and distinctive approach to biblical interpretation in the sixteenth century. Its basic principles can be discovered from the writings of Anabaptist leaders and the practice of Anabaptist congregations. Six convictions characterised this hermeneutics. Scripture was sufficiently clear for all believers to be enfranchised as interpreters. Scripture must be interpreted in the light of Jesus Christ, its focal point. The New Testament must be accorded priority and the Old Testament interpreted in the light of the New. The Holy Spirit was the interpreter, whose guidance must be actively sought. Only those committed to discipleship and obedience to Scripture should expect such guidance. The congregation was the hermeneutic community where all believers could contribute to the interpretive process and where the Spirit's guidance was anticipated. Although these principles were not consciously synthesised into an integrated system, they overlapped, refined and qualified each other.

Anabaptist hermeneutics has been neglected, regarded as naive, derivative and unsophisticated. My thesis is that this treatment is unjustified and that the rediscovery of Anabaptist hermeneutics provides an important resource with significant insights on issues of contemporary hermeneutical concern. Anabaptist hermeneutics is neither Catholic nor Protestant. It represents an alternative approach to biblical interpretation which has a distinctive contribution to make to contemporary hermeneutics.

Anabaptist hermeneutics offers a critique of Constantinian presuppositions that has important perspectives for hermeneutical developments in post-Constantinian societies. It offers informative parallels with Latin American hermeneutics. It can assist in the development of hermeneutics appropriate for the Charismatic Movement. Its hermeneutic community model provides fresh insights on the relationship between churches and scholars.



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## ABBREVIATIONS

AIO	Anabaptism in Outline
CGR	Conrad Grebel Review
EBI	Essays on Biblical Interpretation
ME	Mennonite Encyclopedia
MM	Martyrs' Mirror
MQR	Mennonite Quarterly Review
RR	The Radical Reformation



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## CHAPTER ONE: ANABAPTISM AND HERMENEUTICS

### A. Anabaptism

#### (1) Terminology

Much scholarly discussion has taken place concerning the use of the term "Anabaptism", a label chosen by opponents rather than by those so labelled. It has been variously criticised for focusing too narrowly on the issue of baptism; for its inaccuracy (those labelled "Anabaptists" insisted they were baptising rather than re-baptising); for giving a false impression that a structured organisation or unified movement existed; and for its inability to distinguish between various viewpoints among those described as "Anabaptists."

Other terms have been suggested. One of the more popular, "the Radical Reformation"<sup>1</sup>, indicates the connection with the movement associated with Luther, Zwingli and Calvin but distinguishes a more "radical" wing. Three significant weaknesses of this term are the impression it gives (now widely disputed) that the Anabaptists derived their ideas solely from the Reformation rather than drawing inspiration also from other sources; its inclusion of the Spiritualists and others whose beliefs were different from the Anabaptists; and the unspecified use of "radical" (on some issues the Reformers were arguably more radical than the Anabaptists<sup>2</sup>).

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<sup>1</sup>Williams, George H: The Radical Reformation (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962) passim.

<sup>2</sup>Littell, Franklin H: The Anabaptist View of the Church (Boston: Starr King Press, 1958) xiv-xv.



Other proposals include "Step-children of the Reformers"<sup>3</sup> (which acknowledges the partial parentage of the Reformation), "Left Wing of the Reformation"<sup>4</sup>, and "Bolsheviks of the Reformation"<sup>5</sup>. The Anabaptists called themselves "Brethren", "Christians" or "believers". Arguments can be presented for and against all these terms, none of which is universally accepted. Undoubtedly, though, "Anabaptism" is the most commonly used term, and the approach in this study will be to define the scope of this term carefully and then to employ it consistently.

Reference will also be made frequently to the "Reformers", by which is meant the parallel movement associated with Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and their colleagues during the first half of the sixteenth century. Other terms are sometimes used for this movement, particularly in Anabaptist studies: "mainline reformers", "Magisterial Reformation", and "Protestant Reformation". In this study the term "Reformers" will be used not to refer to the Anabaptists (who were also reformers in some senses) but to those who were committed to reforming the state churches rather than forming new churches.

## (2) Origins and Scope

Anabaptism was a fluid, variegated and yet coherent phenomenon in the first half of the sixteenth century in territories which now form parts of

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<sup>3</sup>Verduin, Leonard: The Reformers and their Stepchildren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) *passim*.

<sup>4</sup>Bainton, Roland: "The Left Wing of the Reformation" *The Journal of Religion* 1941 2:124.

<sup>5</sup>Smith, Preserved: The Age of the Reformation (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1920) 154.



Switzerland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany and the Netherlands. Its distinguishing characteristics included an emphasis on new birth and discipleship in the power of the Holy Spirit; the establishment of "believers' churches" not subject to state control; commitment to economic sharing, "truth-telling", and the rejection of violence and coercion; a pronounced Christocentrism; and a vision of restoring New Testament Christianity rather than reforming a Church they believed to be beyond reformation.

Rejected and persecuted by both Catholics and Protestants, its leaders travelled widely, ignoring parish and national boundaries, evangelising, baptizing and forming congregations. Adherents were drawn primarily from poorer sections of the community, although the early leaders included university graduates, monks and priests. Its numerical strength is hard to assess, partly because it was driven underground and dispersed by persecution, and partly because it influenced many more people than those baptised as members<sup>6</sup>. Traditionally, Anabaptists have been divided into four groups: Swiss Brethren, South German Anabaptists, Dutch Mennonites and the communitarian Hutterites<sup>7</sup>. Recent research has indicated, however, that this is an over-simplification and that there were numerous small groups which gathered around charismatic leaders and developed their own

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<sup>6</sup>See the varying conclusions of Arnold, Eberhard: The Early Anabaptists (Rifton, New York: Plough Publishing House, 1984) 34; Weaver, J Denny: Becoming Anabaptist (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987) 79; and Clasen, Claus-Peter: "Anabaptism: A Social History", in Stayer, James M & Packull, Werner O (eds): The Anabaptists and Thomas Müntzer (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/ Hunt Publishing Co, 1980) 33.

<sup>7</sup>For example, Littell, Franklin H: "The Anabaptists and Christian Tradition" *The Journal of Religious Truth* Vol IV No 2 (1947) 167.



distinctive practices and emphases<sup>8</sup>.

There has been much debate also concerning the roots and origins of Anabaptism. The traditional Mennonite view of Anabaptism as simply a radicalising of the views of Luther and, even more, of Zwingli<sup>9</sup> has been challenged<sup>10</sup>. The influence of Thomas Müntzer and the Zwickau prophets, long regarded as crucial following Bullinger's assertions<sup>11</sup>, but discounted by Mennonite scholars, has been rehabilitated<sup>12</sup>, albeit with considerable caution, and the influence of radical thinkers among the Reformers, such as Karlstadt<sup>13</sup> and Strauss<sup>14</sup> has been acknowledged. Some have

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<sup>8</sup>Claus-Peter Clasen, for example, distinguished 20 groups in the German-speaking areas alone. See Clasen: "Anabaptism: A Social History", in Stayer & Packull, Anabaptists 33.

<sup>9</sup>The classic expression of this is in Harold Bender's seminal paper, "The Anabaptist Vision" Church History (March 1944) 13:3. See also, Blanke, Fritz: Brothers in Christ (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1961) 40.

<sup>10</sup>Friedmann, Robert: The Theology of Anabaptism (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973) 159. He concluded that "it is not allowable to interpret Anabaptism as a sort of radicalized Protestantism".

<sup>11</sup>Weaver: Becoming, 91.

<sup>12</sup>Bergsten, Torsten: Balthasar Hubmaier (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1978) 152; Oyer, John S: Lutheran Reformers Against Anabaptists (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964) 106ff; Packull, Werner O: Mysticism and the Early South German-Austrian Anabaptist Movement (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1977) 178.

<sup>13</sup>Bergsten, Hubmaier 152; Packull, Mysticism 71.

<sup>14</sup>Oyer, Lutheran 106ff.



emphasized the influence of monasticism<sup>15</sup>, the ideas of the Brethren of the Common Life<sup>16</sup>, and the Franciscan Tertiaries<sup>17</sup>. Others have suggested links with pre-Reformation radicals<sup>18</sup>. Others again have noted the impact of humanism<sup>19</sup>, Erasmus<sup>20</sup>, German mysticism<sup>21</sup>, popular pamphleteers<sup>22</sup> and the "devotio moderna"<sup>23</sup>. Most of these suggestions have been challenged, however, on the grounds that there is inadequate documentary evidence<sup>24</sup>, that similarity of belief and practice need not imply derivation<sup>25</sup>, and

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<sup>15</sup>Davis, Kenneth R: Anabaptism and Asceticism (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1974) 72, 112, 126, 199; Snyder, C Arnold: The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984) 197; Weaver, Becoming 49; Yoder, John H: The Legacy of Michael Sattler (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973) 21, 54.

<sup>16</sup>Keeney, William: Dutch Anabaptist Thought and Practice 1539-1564 (Nieuwkoop: B De Graaf, 1968) 116; Verheyden, A: Anabaptism in Flanders 1530-1650 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1961) 13.

<sup>17</sup>Davis, Anabaptism 35; Littell, Church 153.

<sup>18</sup>Arnold, Early 35; Gratz, Delbert: Bernese Anabaptists (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1953) 7; Littell, Church 153; RR 167, 399, 401. George Williams commented that "the new Anabaptist was but the old Lollard writ Dutch": RR 401.

<sup>19</sup>Bergsten, Hubmaier 152.

<sup>20</sup>Armour, Rollin S: Anabaptist Baptism (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1966) 24-6; Bainton, Roland H: Erasmus of Christendom (London: Collins, 1969) 22; Friedmann, Theology 17-8, 40, 159; Augustijn, Cornelis: "Anabaptism in the Netherlands: Another Look" MQR LXII 197ff.

<sup>21</sup>Packull, Mysticism passim; Bergsten, Hubmaier 376; Weaver, Becoming 52; RR 304; Klaassen, Walter: Anabaptism in Outline (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981) 163.

<sup>22</sup>Russell, Paul A: Lay Theology in the Reformation (Cambridge: CUP, 1986) 227.

<sup>23</sup>Davis, Anabaptism 218ff; Bainton, Erasmus 22.

<sup>24</sup>Davis, Anabaptism 27; Oyer, Lutheran 106ff; Littell, Church 153.

<sup>25</sup>Davis, Anabaptism 218ff; AIO 68; Littell, Church 68.



that the Anabaptists' restitutionist approach meant they looked to the New Testament for inspiration rather than to medieval movements<sup>26</sup>.

A long-running dispute revolves around the terms "monogenesis" and "polygenesis" in relation to Anabaptist origins. The traditional Mennonite view<sup>27</sup> that Anabaptism originated among Zwingli's disciples in Zürich and spread into other areas of central and northern Europe has been challenged by many scholars who have argued that the development of Anabaptism was more complex<sup>28</sup> and that various groups emerged independently during the 1520's in Switzerland, The Tyrol and South Germany<sup>29</sup>, although many of these subsequently discovered one another and recognised kindred spirits. The influence of peasant unrest<sup>30</sup>, millenarian hopes<sup>31</sup>, anticlericalism<sup>32</sup> and other factors have increasingly been recognised. Even where Anabaptist ideas were transplanted, as by Hoffman into the Netherlands, it is acknow-

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<sup>26</sup>Davis, Anabaptism 33; Littell, Church 4.

<sup>27</sup>Klaassen, Walter: Anabaptism - Neither Catholic Nor Protestant (Waterloo, Ontario: Conrad Press, 1973) 1-2; Blanke, Fritz: "Anabaptism and the Reformation", in Hershberger, Guy F(ed): The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957) 58.

<sup>28</sup>Stayer, James A, Packull, Werner O and Deppermann, Klaus: "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins" MQR XLIX 83; Armour, Baptism 137; Weaver, Becoming 14; Packull, Mysticism 176.

<sup>29</sup>Weaver, Becoming 52; Packull, Mysticism 36; RR 149; Mellinck, Albert F: "The Beginnings of Dutch Anabaptism in the Light of Recent Research" MQR LXII 211.

<sup>30</sup>Snyder, Sattler 73; RR 166; Clasen, in Stayer & Packull, Anabaptists 35; Stayer, James M: "Anabaptists and Future Anabaptists in the Peasants' War" MQR LXII 99ff.

<sup>31</sup>Armour, Baptism 97; Weaver, Becoming 52; AIO 316.

<sup>32</sup>Weaver, Becoming 25, 52.



ledged that the ground was prepared by local factors<sup>33</sup> (in the Netherlands by the sacramentarian controversy<sup>34</sup>).

Closely connected with this debate over origins are questions concerning "normative" Anabaptism. Mennonites have tended to identify the Swiss Brethren and Dutch Mennonites as normative, calling these "evangelical Anabaptists" in contradistinction to others who were regarded as spiritualistic or revolutionary<sup>35</sup>. This interpretation has been criticised for reading back later Mennonite convictions and practices into early Anabaptism<sup>36</sup>. There have been attempts to broaden the definition of "normative" Anabaptism and to rehabilitate certain figures who did not fit comfortably within the accepted parameters of the movement.

It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss these issues in depth. The approach adopted will be to regard Anabaptism as a diverse but coherent movement<sup>37</sup>; to accept that various stimuli enabled it to take root in different places, but to regard it as essentially a religious and

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<sup>33</sup>Even where definite links cannot be established with earlier radical movements, the lasting effects of these on lay piety, particularly among the poor, should not be underestimated. The Anabaptists often found a ready reception among communities which had quietly kept alive radical ideas that the official church thought had been smothered.

<sup>34</sup>Krahn, Cornelius: Dutch Anabaptism (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968) 81; Weaver, Becoming 71; RR 86.

<sup>35</sup>This is characteristic of scholars such as Bender, Blanke, Klaassen and Yoder.

<sup>36</sup>For example by Stayer, Packull, and Weaver.

<sup>37</sup>As Howard Loewen concluded: "One is not necessarily forced to choose between a monogenesis or polygenesis approach to Anabaptist studies but to transcend it and to affirm a genuine diversity of visions within a real unity": Loewen, Howard J: One Lord, One Church, One Hope and One God (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985) 46.

ecclesiological rather than a political phenomenon; to treat it as a movement with several central perspectives shared widely in all parts of the movement, but with certain other important perspectives represented by individuals and groups on various wings of the movement. Accordingly, Hans Denck, Balthasar Hubmaier and Melchior Hoffman, whose views on certain topics differed from most Anabaptists, will be treated as being within the movement.

On the fringe were men like David Joris, Obbe Phillips and Hans Bänderlin, significant Anabaptist leaders who later renounced Anabaptism in favour of Spiritualism; and Bernhard Rothmann and Andreas Fischer, who identified themselves with Anabaptism but whose views diverged markedly from most Anabaptists. Their writings will be treated cautiously: their statements on certain issues will be noted, but they will not be regarded as a reliable sources upon which to assess Anabaptist thinking on these issues.

### (3) Contemporary Significance

The rehabilitation of Anabaptism during the last 60 years is now a familiar, though still impressive, story. After centuries of neglect and dismissal, evaluation on the basis of statements from their opponents, and misinterpretation, Anabaptism has been rediscovered as a potent source of renewal and a highly relevant historical movement. The "Anabaptist Vision" has been glimpsed afresh, not just by the Anabaptists' lineal descendants, but by theologians and practitioners from various ecclesiological backgrounds.

It is beyond the scope of this study to attempt an exhaustive survey of the contemporary significance of Anabaptism, but the following examples



demonstrate the indebtedness of many to the vision, example and writings of the Anabaptists, and the potential for creative interaction between Anabaptism and several contemporary movements.

The influence of Anabaptism on contemporary Christianity is mediated partly through the direct<sup>38</sup> and indirect<sup>39</sup> descendants of the Anabaptists. It was calculated in 1948 that these could account for almost a quarter of the membership of the World Council of Churches<sup>40</sup>. The influence of Baptists and Mennonites on the thinking and practice of churches across the world has been significant, especially through their missionary activities. If the rapidly expanding Pentecostal movement is included among the descendants of Anabaptism (and John Yoder has suggested that Pentecostalism is its closest contemporary equivalent<sup>41</sup>), then these descendants form a major force in contemporary Christianity alongside the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant streams.

Furthermore, the Anabaptist vision has functioned in recent years as a

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<sup>38</sup>Primarily the Mennonites, the Brethren in Christ and the Hutterites.

<sup>39</sup>By "indirect descendants" are meant those groups which have either some lineal connection with the Anabaptists, albeit not as direct as the Mennonites, Hutterites or the Brethren in Christ, or major features which were derived in some way from Anabaptism. The Baptists are an example of the former. The Methodists and the Arminian wing of Dutch Calvinism are examples of the latter.

<sup>40</sup>Payne, Ernest A: The Anabaptists of the Sixteenth Century (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1949) 20.

<sup>41</sup>Yoder, quoted by Davis, Kenneth: "The Origins of Anabaptism: Ascetic and Charismatic Elements Exemplifying Continuity and Discontinuity", in Lienhard, Marc (ed): The Origins and Characteristics of Anabaptism (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977) 37.

renewing model for these groups. Mennonites have become aware of the extent to which they have adopted ideas and practices from Protestantism<sup>42</sup>, and in many places they have consciously returned to Anabaptist emphases<sup>43</sup>. Among Baptists, also, there is growing interest in their hitherto embarrassing Anabaptist roots and a readiness to explore the implications for their church polity<sup>44</sup>.

Not surprisingly, contemporary movements committed to exploring the radical implications of discipleship have drawn on the Anabaptist vision. Among these are Radical Evangelicals in North and South America, who acknowledge Anabaptism as a spiritual if not a lineal root (although Ronald Sider, an influential leader, has lineal descent also)<sup>45</sup>; and some sections of the House Church Movement in the United Kingdom, whose

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<sup>42</sup>Yoder, John: "Orientation in Midstream: A Response to the Responses", in Schipani, Daniel S (ed): Freedom and Discipleship (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989) 161; Klaassen, Walter: "The Modern Relevance of Anabaptism", in Goertz, Hans-Jurgen (ed): Umstrittenes Taufertum 1525-1975 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975) 290.

<sup>43</sup>See, for example, Jackson, Dave & Neta: Glimpses of Glory (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981); Ruth-Heffelbower, Duane: The Anabaptists Are Back ! (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991).

<sup>44</sup>See, for example, Wright, Nigel: The Challenge to Change (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1991); Sellars, Ian: "Edwardians, Anabaptists and the Problem of Baptist Origins" *The Baptist Quarterly* XXIX 97. For a summary of recent Baptist approaches to Anabaptist links, see Whittock, Martyn J: "Baptist Roots: The Use of Models in Tracing Baptist Origins" *Evangelical Quarterly* LVII 317.

<sup>45</sup>Michaelson, Wes: "What Nurtures Us ?" in Sojourners (May 1978) 16. Mennonite scholar, John Yoder, has significantly influenced the thinking of Radical Evangelicals through his writings. On the relationship between Anabaptism and Radical Discipleship, see further below at pp366ff.



ecclesiology and restitutionist perspective are similar to those of the Anabaptists<sup>46</sup>. Other "free church" writers also identify themselves as Anabaptist in perspective, whatever their denominational allegiances<sup>47</sup>.

Within these groups, where Anabaptism has already been influential, there are issues where the Anabaptist vision may have further perspectives to contribute<sup>48</sup>. John Yoder suggested, for example, that the Anabaptist commitment to enemy-loving should be included explicitly in the concept of discipleship adopted by Radical Evangelicals<sup>49</sup>. And David Shank warned modern free churches to beware illegitimate liaisons with state power, which may not be official but which differ little from the state-church synthesis. He cautioned that "a modern free church is not necessarily a continuation of the Anabaptist vision"<sup>50</sup>.

Within other groups, where Anabaptism had no influence in the initial stages, parallels have been recognised and Anabaptists welcomed as conversation partners in the further development of perspectives and practices. Examples of this are the Kimbanguist movement in Africa<sup>51</sup> and

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<sup>46</sup>In particular, the theology and ethos of the influential Ichthus Christian Fellowship. Michael Harper suggested (in Restoration Jan/Feb 1980 p8) that the House Churches are in the line of Dissenters that derive from the Anabaptists.

<sup>47</sup>See, for example, the writings of Methodist, Stanley Hauerwas and Seventh Day Adventist, Charles Scriven.

<sup>48</sup>See below at pp 374, 397ff.

<sup>49</sup>Yoder: "Response to Padilla", in Branson, Mark & Padilla, C Rene: Conflict and Context (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 99.

<sup>50</sup>Shank, David A: "Anabaptists and Mission", in Shenk, Wilbert R: Anabaptism and Mission (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984) 220.

<sup>51</sup>Klaassen: "The Modern Relevance of Anabaptism", in Goertz, Umstrittenes 298-9.

Perhaps more surprising is the recognition within Catholic and mainline Protestant circles of the contribution Anabaptism might make to the contemporary church. Jurgen Moltmann urged the recovery of the idea of discipleship found among the Anabaptists but sadly neglected by the Reformers and their descendants<sup>53</sup>. Peter Wagner used the Anabaptists in his writings on Church Growth as an example of a sodality-type structure that combined church and mission agency<sup>54</sup>. Michael Novak, in a famous article entitled "The Free Churches and the Roman Church", interpreted Vatican II and its developments as moving in the direction of the Anabaptist vision in several areas<sup>55</sup>. Popular journals are prepared to devote considerable space to Anabaptism<sup>56</sup>.

In these circles, there is no intention of adopting the Anabaptist vision in its entirety, but there is considerable interest in many of their perspectives<sup>57</sup>: their witness to peace and enemy-loving as an integral

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<sup>52</sup>Schipani, Freedom, passim; Rutschman, LaVerne: "Anabaptism and Liberation Theology" MQR LV 269. On the relationship between Anabaptism and Liberation Theology, see below at pp347ff.

<sup>53</sup>Moltmann, Jurgen : The Power of the Powerless, (London: SCM Press, 1983) 79-80.

<sup>54</sup>Wagner, C Peter: Leading Your Church to Growth (Bromley: MARC/BCGA, 1986) 154.

<sup>55</sup>Klaassen, Walter: "The Modern Relevance of Anabaptism", in Goertz, Umstrittenen 296.

<sup>56</sup>For example, Christianity Today (October 22, 1990).

<sup>57</sup>See below at pp316ff.



part of the gospel<sup>58</sup>; discipleship and "doing the truth"<sup>59</sup>; a commitment to religious liberty and tolerance<sup>60</sup>; anti-institutionalism<sup>61</sup>; a commitment to community and economic sharing<sup>62</sup>; the potential of creating counter-cultural alternatives<sup>63</sup>; witness to the poor<sup>64</sup>; and the rejection of Constantinianism<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>58</sup>Klaassen, Neither v; Hillerbrand, Hans: The Reformation in its Own Words (London: SCM Press, 1964) 221.

<sup>59</sup>Hillerbrand, Reformation 221; Moltmann, Power 79-80; Klaassen: "The Modern Relevance of Anabaptism", in Goertz, Umstrittenen 295.

<sup>60</sup>Klaassen, Neither v; Bainton, Roland H: "The Anabaptist Contribution to History", in Hershberger, Recovery 317; Brown, Dale W: "The Radical Reformation: Then and Now" MQR XLV 257; Payne, Anabaptists 7.

<sup>61</sup>Brown, "Radical" 257; Klaassen, Neither 72ff.

<sup>62</sup>Payne, Anabaptists 17; Weaver, Becoming 129; Driver, John: "The Anabaptist Vision and Social Justice", in Schipani, Freedom 110; De Santa Ana, Julio: Good News to the Poor (Geneva: WCC, 1977) 42.

<sup>63</sup>Rutschman, LaVerne: "Anabaptism and Liberation Theology", in Schipani, Freedom 56; Pinnock, Clark H: "Our Audience: Atheist or Alienated ?", in Branson & Padilla, Conflict 48; Brown, "Radical" 257.

<sup>64</sup>Shaul, Richard: "Responding to the Challenge: Renewal and Re-Creation", in Schipani, Freedom 149-156; Rutschmann, "Anabaptism" 269. The relevance of the Anabaptist vision to inner city ministry has also been noticed, by Littell, Franklin H: A Tribute to Menno Simons (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1961) 50; and by Murray, Stuart W: City Vision (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990) 66.

<sup>65</sup>By "Constantinianism" is meant the Church's acceptance of State patronage and control. Anabaptists regarded the changes in the church in the years following the conversion of the emperor Constantine as illegitimate and damaging. Rejecting the Catholic and Protestant church systems, they set up believers' churches free from State control. For a detailed exploration of the issue of Constantinianism and its hermeneutical implications, see below at pp319ff.

Suggestions have also been made concerning the significance of Anabaptist perspectives in the wider society. Modern ideas about democracy, the separation of Church and State, and consensus decision-making can be traced to various sources, but Anabaptism is arguably one influential source of these now widely-accepted concepts<sup>66</sup>.

The contemporary significance of Anabaptism, then, comprises a mixture of parallels, spiritual and lineal roots, perspectives on issues, challenges to further radical developments, and sources of renewal and encouragement. There are certainly areas of weakness in the Anabaptist vision, either because issues were not considered or because questionable perspectives were adopted<sup>67</sup>. Some who acknowledge indebtedness to Anabaptism are concerned to develop further the vision that inspired them, so that it continues to provide a challenge to both church and society in the twenty first century.

## B. Hermeneutics

### (1) Terminology and Scope

Carl Braaten has defined hermeneutics as "the science of reflecting on how a word or event in a past time and culture may be understood and become

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<sup>66</sup>Klaassen, Neither 72; Peachey, Paul: "The Radical Reformation, Political Pluralism, and the Corpus Christianum", in Lienhard, Origins 21; Bainton, Roland: "The Anabaptist Contribution to History", in Hershberger, Recovery 317; Yoder, John: "The Biblical Mandate", in Sider, Ronald J: The Chicago Declaration (Carol Stream, Illinois: Creation House, 1974) 97; Littell, Franklin H: From State Church to Pluralism (New York: Macmillan, 1971) xxv; Wood, Philip: Decision Making in the Hermeneutic Community (Leeds: unpublished MA Thesis, University of Leeds, 1991) 66-7.

<sup>67</sup>See, for example, pp89-92, 131-142.



existentially meaningful in our present situation"<sup>68</sup>. Traditionally, hermeneutics has functioned as a generic term including both exegesis - the attempt to establish the original meaning of a text - and interpretation - the attempt to discover the present significance of that text. Attention in scholarly circles, at least since the Reformation, has been concentrated on exegesis<sup>69</sup>, resulting in the development of methods that have vastly increased the ability of scholars to explain the original meaning, cultural and historical setting, and canonical context of biblical texts.

The scope of hermeneutics has been enlarged in recent years, however, by the challenge of new approaches and insights from disciplines such as linguistics, philosophy, anthropology and the social sciences. The "New Hermeneutic" concentrates on the interpreter rather than the text, on presuppositions, and on the cultural and historical context in which interpretation takes place<sup>70</sup>. Various liberation theologies challenge interpreters to start with their present situation rather than with biblical texts, and to see theology and hermeneutics as reflection on praxis, rather than an academic exercise or a precursor to action<sup>71</sup>. And from missiological discussions come concerns about contextualisation and

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<sup>68</sup>Braaten, Carl E: New Directions in Theology Today Volume II: History and Hermeneutics (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968) 131.

<sup>69</sup>Ferguson, Duncan: Biblical Hermeneutics (London: SCM Press, 1987) 4.

<sup>70</sup>Thiselton, Anthony C: The Two Horizons (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980); Carson, Donald A & Woodbridge, John D: Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon (Leicester: IVP, 1976).

<sup>71</sup>Rowland, Christopher & Corner, Mark: Liberating Exegesis (London: SPCK, 1990) 76.

listening to the hermeneutical insights of the worldwide church<sup>72</sup>.

All these influences have shifted the focus from exegesis alone to the whole process of interpretation, of understanding not only the original meaning of the text but its significance for those who would interpret and apply it today. Exegetical study continues, but here too there are changes, as the methods used to establish the meaning of texts are subjected to constant review in the light of new disciplines such as structuralism, canon criticism, reader-response theory, and discourse analysis<sup>73</sup>.

## (2) Contemporary Significance

While some justification of the contemporary significance of Anabaptism may be thought necessary, it is arguable that the subject of hermeneutics is always of central importance to the churches. Whatever issues are being debated, the question of biblical interpretation must be considered while the Bible is still regarded as at least one significant source of guidance for the Christian community.

But the proliferation of new approaches and methodologies in recent years

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<sup>72</sup>See Kraft, Charles: Christianity in Culture (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979); Padilla, C Rene: Mission Between the Times (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); Hesselgrave, David J & Rommen, Edward: Contextualization (Leicester: Apollos, 1989); Carson, Donald A: The Church in the Bible and the World (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1987) 220; and Conn, Harvie M: "Contextualization: Where Do We Begin ?", in Armerding, Carl E (ed): Evangelicals and Liberation (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co, 1977) 90.

<sup>73</sup>Keegan, Terence: Interpreting the Bible (New York: Paulist Press, 1975); Cotterell, Peter & Turner, Max: Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation.



indicates that hermeneutics is of particular contemporary importance. The long-dominant historical-critical method has produced impressive results, but is facing powerful challenges from those who believe it is reaching the end of its usefulness<sup>74</sup>, as well as from the new approaches to hermeneutics mentioned above. There are also suggestions that pre-Reformation methods of interpretation should be reconsidered<sup>75</sup>. Peter Macky suggested that biblical scholarship is undergoing a paradigm shift. He considered it the most important change in hermeneutics since the Reformation, when a comparable, though quite different, shift occurred<sup>76</sup>.

One reason for this discontent and the emergence of new approaches to interpretation is the gap between hermeneutical methods used by scholars and interpretation in the churches. Most Christians continue to interpret Scripture in a pre-critical and purely devotional way, regardless of the expertise of generations of scholars. Arguably, however, some of the new approaches are no more accessible to most churchgoers than the traditional methods. Indeed, the proliferation and increasing complexity of these approaches may have the effect of further distancing scholars from the

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<sup>74</sup>Maier, Gerhard: The End of the Historical-Critical Method (St Louis: Concordia, 1977); Wink, Walter: The Bible in Human Transformation (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973).

<sup>75</sup>See Mercadante, Linda: "Response to Pinnock", in Branson, Conflict 58; Moo, Douglas J: "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*", in Carson & Woodbridge, Hermeneutics 195.

<sup>76</sup>Macky, Peter W: "The Coming Revolution: The New Literary Approach to the New Testament", in McKim, Donald K: A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 263-4.

churches<sup>77</sup>.

### C. Anabaptist Hermeneutics

Absent from the above survey of the contemporary significance of Anabaptism was any mention of hermeneutics. There may be evidence that Anabaptism is of contemporary relevance, and agreement that hermeneutics is a crucial contemporary issue, but the contemporary significance of Anabaptist hermeneutics has yet to be considered. Few Mennonite scholars have explored this area<sup>78</sup>, and it has received little attention elsewhere<sup>79</sup>. But there are reasons for suspecting that Anabaptist hermeneutics might have a significant contribution to make.

First, some of the key hermeneutical issues of the Reformation emerged from debates between the Anabaptists and the Reformers: namely, the relationship between the Testaments, the role of the Holy Spirit in

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<sup>77</sup>Krentz, Edgar: The Historical-Critical Method (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) 3; Steinmetz, David C: "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis", in McKim, Guide 77; Fiorenza, Elizabeth S: Bread Not Stone (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) 31-2, 119.

<sup>78</sup>A representative collection of Mennonite writings on Anabaptist hermeneutics is contained in Swartley, Willard (ed): Essays on Biblical Interpretation (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984).

<sup>79</sup>Some have used Anabaptist hermeneutics as an example of what to avoid - biblicism, illuminism, literalism, etc. See, for example: Potter, George R: Zwingli (Cambridge: CUP, 1976); Holland, Robert C: The Hermeneutics of Peter Riedeman 1506-1556 (Basel: Friedrich Reinhart Kommissionsverlag, 1970). But most works on the history of hermeneutics or contemporary hermeneutics either ignore Anabaptism or include merely a pejorative reference to it as a fringe group the Reformers had to deal with as they developed their hermeneutics: see, for example, Coggins R J & Houlden J L: Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation (London: SCM Press, 1990), which has three such references in its several hundred pages.



interpretation, the place of the congregation in hermeneutics, the epistemological significance of obedience, and the extent to which Scripture can be regarded as perspicuous. The Reformers' triumph and the suppression of the Anabaptists ensured that the hermeneutical views of the former were embraced by subsequent generations. But these issues remain contentious and important. If the hermeneutical tradition which developed from the Reformers' hermeneutics has failed to provide adequate answers to these questions<sup>80</sup>, it may be worth re-examining the alternative answers suggested by the long-suppressed Anabaptist approach.

Second, many challenges presented on these issues by various contemporary movements<sup>81</sup> seem similar to the way in which the Anabaptists dealt with the same issues. A re-examination of the Anabaptist approach may assist in evaluating and, possibly, refining these new approaches.

Third, the Anabaptist approach to hermeneutics was communal. As such, it

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<sup>80</sup>On the relationship between the Testaments, see Baker, David L: Two Testaments, One Bible (Leicester: IVP, 1976); Smart, James D: The Interpretation of Scripture (London: SCM Press, 1961) 65; Gasque, W Ward & LaSor, William S (eds): Scripture, Tradition and Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 260; Carson, Donald A: Biblical Interpretation and the Church (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1984) 27. On the question of interpretation and application, see Betz, Hans D: The Bible as a Document of the University (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981) 43. On the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation, see Frame, John M: "The Spirit and the Scriptures", in Carson & Woodbridge, Hermeneutics 220ff; Thiselton, Two 92. On the perspicuity of Scripture, see Maier, End 48.

<sup>81</sup>For example: the challenge of liberation theologies to the traditional relationship between understanding and application; the challenge of the Charismatic Movement regarding the Spirit's role; the importance given to the congregation by approaches such as reader-response theory; and the attempt of several scholars to move beyond the literal sense of texts by using a *sensus plenior* approach.

provides an alternative historical paradigm and a heritage as long as that of the scholarly approach. A careful study of this approach and an appreciation of its value might contribute significantly towards closing the gap between scholars and the churches<sup>82</sup>.

Fourth, Anabaptists, unlike the Reformers and most scholarly interpreters, were mainly poor, uneducated and persecuted. It is arguable that this gave them insights into Scripture that were less accessible to their more comfortable contemporaries, but which are analogous both to the experience of the early churches and to many Christian communities today. It is arguable, too, that the Anabaptists' rejection of the Constantinian synthesis of Church and State affected their understanding of Scripture, just as its continued acceptance by both Catholics and Protestants may have influenced their hermeneutics. In the contemporary post-Constantinian situation in which most churches now operate, it is possible that the Anabaptist approach has much to offer<sup>83</sup>.

Finally, the Anabaptist approach to interpreting Scripture is not without parallels in church history. Anabaptist hermeneutics is significant, not only as the approach of one particular historical movement, but as one expression of a way of handling Scripture which has characterised numerous

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<sup>82</sup>The existence of this gap is acknowledged by many scholars. See, for example: Johnson, Luke T (ed): Decision Making in the Church: A Biblical Model (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 35; Krentz, Historical-Critical 3; Hauerwas, Stanley & Williamson, William H: Resident Aliens (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1989) 128-9; Kraft, Charles H: "Supracultural Meanings via Cultural Forms", in McKim, Guide 342; Steinmetz: "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis", in McKim, Guide 77.

<sup>83</sup>See further below at pp322ff.



"fringe" groups throughout church history<sup>84</sup>. Studying these groups reveals considerable diversity but also areas of fundamental agreement that distinguish all these groups from their "mainline" contemporaries. The persistence of this alternative approach suggests that it might contain valuable elements that have been neglected by others.

It is my contention that Anabaptist hermeneutics offers an exciting alternative to traditional post-Reformation approaches to Scripture, an approach that represents a long history of biblical interpretation outside the "mainstream", and an approach that can interact helpfully with several contemporary movements. In the absence of a comprehensive and integrated survey of Anabaptist hermeneutics, the assembling of such a survey is the initial task of this study. On this basis the contemporary relevance of Anabaptist hermeneutics can be explored<sup>85</sup>.

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<sup>84</sup>These groups would include, among many others, the Waldenses, the Lollards, and the Unitas Fratrum.

<sup>85</sup>The scope of the present study is deliberately restricted to the period 1525-1560, roughly the first generation of Anabaptism. It is limited also to Anabaptist writings which are available in English translation. These limitations are necessary in order to keep the study within reasonable bounds. It is thought unlikely that sources omitted from this study would do more than confirm the conclusions drawn or require marginal changes of emphasis. The resulting survey will be comprehensive enough to act as a basis for the evaluation of the contemporary significance of Anabaptist hermeneutics, with which this study concludes. This study will, however, give attention to certain sources not often referred to by scholars - in particular to the contributions of "ordinary" Anabaptists on trial or in letters from prison.

## A. Introduction

The assertion that the Anabaptists had a hermeneutic which is not only worth studying in itself but which may also make important contributions to contemporary hermeneutical discussions may be challenged for several reasons. First, it is sometimes argued that Anabaptists were biblicists and could not, therefore, have developed any but the crudest interpretive methodology. Second, it is often thought that Anabaptism was a radical version of the Reformers' teaching, and it is assumed that their hermeneutic was similar to and derived from the Reformers. Third, the diversity within early Anabaptism is a potential obstacle to the discovery of any representative hermeneutic.

The purpose of this section is to examine these challenges and to present evidence for the existence of an Anabaptist hermeneutic which was carefully thought out, distinctive and coherent.

## B. A Biblical People

Anabaptists were recognised, by friends and enemies alike, as a "biblical people"<sup>1</sup>, in an age when the rediscovery and dissemination of the Bible was effecting major changes in the social, religious and intellectual life of Europe. It is difficult to assess how many were able to read the Bible for themselves, or the extent to which reading the Bible motivated people to embrace principles taught by the Reformers. But historians of the period agree that the introduction of printing fifty years earlier and the

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<sup>1</sup>AIO 141.



distribution of the Bible in the vernacular were significant factors in the way in which the Reformation spread and took root among lay people<sup>2</sup>.

Anabaptists were not the only ones reading the Bible with enthusiasm and fascination; but they were distinguished by an unusual passion for it. The Bible was read, studied, memorised, recited, discussed and applied, by individuals, in the home, in church meetings and in informal discussion groups<sup>3</sup>. Preaching and teaching played a major part in their gatherings, as it did in Reformed churches, but they also expected many members of the congregation to contribute questions and insights, rather than listening passively to their leaders.

A favourite passage among Swiss Anabaptists was 1 Corinthians 14:26-33. The Anabaptists took seriously Paul's injunctions that "when you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation" (v26). They noted his advice that "two or three prophets should speak, and the others should carefully weigh what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop" (v29-30). Consequently, ordinary Anabaptists were much more involved than their counterparts in the Reformed churches in exploring and interpreting Scripture. They searched the Bible for themselves and participated in the congregational process of discerning its meaning and application. They were, even in an age of widespread biblical

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<sup>2</sup>See McGrath, Alister E: The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987) 129; and Holborn, Louise: "Printing and the Growth of a Protestant Movement in Germany from 1517 to 1524" *Church History* 11 (1942) 123-137.

<sup>3</sup>See Blanke, Brothers, passim.

rediscovery, a peculiarly "biblical people". This every-member approach to Scripture had profound implications for Anabaptist hermeneutics<sup>4</sup>.

To understand Anabaptist hermeneutics, an examination of the writings of their leaders is inadequate. The contribution of the leaders, especially those who were educated, was not to provide authoritative answers to doctrinal questions or authoritative interpretations of biblical texts, but rather to provide tools for their brothers and sisters to explore Scripture themselves<sup>5</sup>. Rather than supplying catechisms to enable members to repeat the "correct answers", Anabaptist leaders provided aids to personal and group Bible study. Often these took the form of what came to be called "concordances" - systematic collections of biblical quotations for use in study groups<sup>6</sup>.

Robert Friedmann commented that these books were "not only Bible indexes but to some extent real guides through the Bible"<sup>7</sup> providing hermeneutical assistance to help readers make sense out of an otherwise bewildering array of texts. These guides were certainly important, and undoubtedly the writings of Anabaptist leaders are a primary source for understanding Anabaptist hermeneutics. But no study of the hermeneutics of this "biblical people" can afford to ignore the contribution of the many uneducated but Bible-saturated men and women who lived and died for

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<sup>4</sup>See below in sections on congregational hermeneutics and the Bible as self-interpreting, at pp64, 224.

<sup>5</sup>See Harder, Leland: The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985) 425.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Wenger, John C: "An Early Anabaptist Tract on Hermeneutics" MQR XLII 26-7.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Harder, Sources 426.



principles that flowed from their congregational approach to Scripture.

It is arguable that this feature of Anabaptism undercuts the claim that there is any coherent Anabaptist hermeneutic. Most Anabaptist writings and accounts of their statements in trials and investigations were far from the Reformers' systematic treatises. Often these consisted of strings of quotations from and references to the Bible with little attempt to provide an interpretive framework. The amazement and irritation of interrogators is evident in several accounts in Martyrs' Mirror<sup>8</sup>, as their theological questions are met, not with reasoned responses, but with a barrage of texts. "Their interrogators were frequently astonished at the wealth of biblical knowledge held even by uneducated Anabaptists", wrote Walter Klaassen<sup>9</sup> - it was on this basis particularly that he designated them a "biblical people".

However, it can equally be argued that it was this knowledge of the Bible but ignorance of traditional hermeneutics that together produced some distinctive features of Anabaptist hermeneutics. The guidelines provided by the more educated leaders prevented the Anabaptists from lapsing into naive subjectivism in their use of Scripture; but the contribution of ordinary members, which was encouraged and expected, helped prevent those leaders from uncritically adopting traditional or Reformed hermeneutics, as their understandings of Scripture were subjected to congregational scrutiny.

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<sup>8</sup>van Braght, Thieleman J: Martyrs' Mirror (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950).

<sup>9</sup>AIO 141.

## C. Biblicists ?

That Anabaptists were "biblical people" is not in dispute, among either their contemporaries or later scholars. Although some popular views of Anabaptists associated them with illuminism and reliance on an "inner light"<sup>10</sup>, the leaders who most strongly emphasised such aspects were known also as men who valued highly the written Scriptures<sup>11</sup>. But should the Anabaptists be designated "biblicists" ? The answer depends on how this term is defined. It has certainly been applied to them by many people - some using it descriptively, some approvingly, and others pejoratively. Discriminating between these usages will clarify the issues and assist in assessing the evidence used to support or refute the charge of biblicism.

Some commentators used the term "biblicists" to mean only that the Anabaptists knew and quoted the Bible extensively. Henry Smith, for example, wrote: "No other people during the Reformation knew the contents of the Bible as did the Anabaptists. Biblicists they are sometimes called"<sup>12</sup>. Equating biblicism with Bible knowledge merely underlines what was established in the previous section, namely, that the Anabaptists had an exceptional love for and familiarity with Scripture. If this is all the

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<sup>10</sup>These issues will be considered below at pp215ff.

<sup>11</sup>Hans Denck, for example, whose emphasis on the inner word was so strong that some have questioned whether he should even be included among the Anabaptists, wrote: "I hold the Scriptures dear above all of man's treasures", although typically he added: "but not as high as the Word of God which is living, strong, eternal and free of all elements of this world". See Furcha, Edward J & Battles, Ford L: Selected Writings of Hans Denck (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1975) 123-4.

<sup>12</sup>Quoted by Augsburg, Myron S: "Conversion in Anabaptist Thought" (MQR XXXVI) 252.



term implies, then no Anabaptist would have baulked at it<sup>13</sup>.

The term was used with a slightly different connotation by John Yoder, who was dismissive of its significance: "When it is reported at great length (quite accurately) by scholars that the Anabaptists were very biblicistic, this does not say too much. Everyone was a biblicist in the sixteenth century"<sup>14</sup>. The implication is that the Anabaptists shared the pre-critical approach to Scripture that characterised all groups in the Reformation period.

Which of the above shades of meaning for the term "biblicist" is more accurate is not important here. In an era of biblicism, the Anabaptists were unusually immersed in the Bible. While it is unlikely that they will have answers to questions raised in later, more critical, eras (the same can be said of Reformation hermeneutics), they thought seriously about how the Bible should be interpreted and adopted principles that were quite different from those of their contemporaries. These principles may have continuing value and significance<sup>15</sup>.

However, the term "biblicist" was often used pejoratively to castigate Anabaptists as "bibliolaters", "fundamentalists", or non-systematic. Their contemporaries accused them of adopting such a stance towards Scripture, and later writers have continued to criticise them as simplistic, legalistic, unsophisticated, ignorant of linguistics and the historical background of the Bible, and liable to take verses out of context. These

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<sup>13</sup>See also Wenger's chapter: "The Biblicism of the Anabaptists" in Hershberger, Recovery 167; and EBI 80.

<sup>14</sup>EBI 15.

<sup>15</sup>See below at pp316ff.

criticisms will be examined in detail later<sup>16</sup>, but some initial comments are appropriate here. The point at issue is whether the Anabaptists reflected enough on the need for and difficulties associated with biblical interpretation to have developed a hermeneutic. Some usages of "biblicism" imply that they did not and that, therefore, the search for Anabaptist hermeneutics will be fruitless.

Were Anabaptists "bibliolaters" ? Did they give too much honour, attention and deference to the Bible ? Were they so determined to live under its authority that they failed to ask the questions necessary to develop a hermeneutic ? Considering their well-known love for and knowledge of the Bible, and the way in which they memorised and quoted it<sup>17</sup>, it would have been surprising if they had not been dubbed bibliolaters.

What is more surprising is that sometimes they accused the Reformers of bibliolatry. A striking example of this comes from the defence statement of a lesser-known Anabaptist, Hans Umläuft. He was quoted as saying: "We give Scripture the honour due and allow it to be a lantern and a sheath of the word, knowing that something more belongs to it, namely a sword in the sheath and a light in the lantern, if they are to shine and cut. When we say this some say it is a despising of scripture, and that one cannot know it too much. It is like the matter of honouring Mary. If Mary is given the honour due only to God, that is making an idol of scripture, as of

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<sup>16</sup>See below at pp89ff.

<sup>17</sup>John Wenger quoted from an unnamed Anabaptist the brief but telling aside: "I hope to be able to learn one hundred chapters of the Testament by heart". See Wenger: "The Biblicism of the Anabaptists", in Hershberger, Recovery 167.



Mary"<sup>18</sup>. Umläuft was accusing the Reformers of replacing Mariolatry with bibliolatry. While acknowledging the importance of the Bible, he refused to give to it honour that he believed was due to God alone. He - together with other Anabaptists - felt that the Reformers were making a fetish out of the Bible and were bound to a sacred text rather than to the living word of God.

Two different concerns, one practical and the other theological, lay behind this reticence to over-emphasise the Scriptures. The practical concern flowed from the Anabaptist leaders' pastoral responsibility for their churches which were developing across Europe. In these churches, and all around them, were people who could not read. Unduly to stress the written Scriptures would have tended to disenfranchise again the very people who were being liberated by Anabaptism from priestly and scholarly monopolies<sup>19</sup>. Hans Denck insisted: "A person who has been elected by God may be saved without preaching or scripture"<sup>20</sup>.

The theological concern was that the Bible should not be regarded as equivalent to the Word of God. Umläuft's statement exemplified this, depicting the written Scriptures as a sheath for the sword which is the word of God, and as a lantern for the light which is the word. The Bible is here regarded as containing the word of God rather than being identical with it. Terminology used by various Anabaptist groups on this issue

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<sup>18</sup>See Klaassen, Walter: Sixteenth Century Anabaptism - Defences, Confessions and Refutations (Waterloo, Ontario: Conrad Grebel College, 1981) 116.

<sup>19</sup>See EBI 81; AIO 141.

<sup>20</sup>Furcha & Battles, Denck 124.

varied somewhat<sup>21</sup>, but in general they were reluctant to tie the living word of God to static texts, although they clearly affirmed the Bible's authority over subjective experience<sup>22</sup>.

This reticence to identify the Bible *simpliciter* with the Word of God was regarded with suspicion by the Reformers as a dilution of the *sola scriptura* principle<sup>23</sup>. Whether or not their antagonism was justified, it is clear that the Anabaptist stance on this issue hardly qualified them as bibliolaters. The Anabaptists were assailed from both sides, accused both of narrow bibliolatry and of devaluing Scripture<sup>24</sup>. They in turn accused the Reformers both of bibliolatry and of subordinating Scripture to scholarship<sup>25</sup>. In this period when the Bible was being rediscovered and returned to a place of authority in the Church, everyone was struggling to define its role vis a vis scholarship and tradition on the one hand and the illumination of the Holy Spirit on the other.

It would seem, then, that the conclusion that Anabaptists could contribute little towards hermeneutics because they were bibliolaters and unwilling to reflect on issues of interpretation is unjustified. Indeed, as William Estep concluded, "The Anabaptist view of the Bible was far from a static concept. On the contrary it became a dynamic centre of a biblical and creative theology free from the entangling hindrances of tradition and

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<sup>21</sup>See below at pp213ff.

<sup>22</sup>See EBI 6; Beachey, Alvin J: The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation (Nieuwkoop: B De Graaf, 1977) 152.

<sup>23</sup>See, for example, McGrath, Intellectual 138ff.

<sup>24</sup>On this, see below, pp185ff.

<sup>25</sup>See, for example, Klaassen, Walter: "Speaking in Simplicity: Balthasar Hubmaier" (MQR XL) 139; and Klaassen, William & Klaassen, Walter: The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1978) 71ff.



scholasticism alike"<sup>26</sup>.

Were Anabaptists "fundamentalists" ? As with "biblicist", this term has been used descriptively and pejoratively, and with various meanings. All the Reformers were fundamentalists if by this is meant commitment to the principle of sola scriptura. This was a commitment which the Anabaptists fully shared. But if the term is used to compare sixteenth century movements with the fundamentalist movement of the last 150 years, then neither Reformers nor Anabaptists would qualify as fundamentalists<sup>27</sup>. Any attempt to classify sixteenth century groups as "fundamentalists" or "liberals" is anachronistic and untenable.

The term "fundamentalist" is sometimes used to imply a blinkered approach to the Bible that refuses to consider questions about how it should be interpreted and hides behind a stringent view of biblical inspiration or a simplistic view of the perspicuity of Scripture. To call the Anabaptists "fundamentalists" in this sense would be to assume that they were unable to consider hermeneutical issues because of their concern to protect its

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<sup>26</sup>Estep, William R: The Anabaptist Story (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 144.

<sup>27</sup>It was to this comparison that Paul Peachey referred in his statement that "Anabaptist biblicism in modern times has become widely identified with the Fundamentalist view of Scripture". See Peachey, Paul: "The Modern Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision" in Hershberger, Recovery 333. Horsch, John: Mennonites in Europe (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950) had interpreted Anabaptism as a form of fundamentalism, but Norman Kraus has rejected any attempt to equate Anabaptism and Fundamentalism, arguing that Anabaptism should be understood as an alternative to both fundamentalism and liberalism. See Kraus: "A Brief Autobiographical Account", in Kauffman R A: A Disciple's Christology: Appraisals of Kraus' Jesus Christ Our Lord (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1989) 2-3.

unique authority in their lives and their conviction that it could be understood by ordinary people. Timothy George has characterised them as being committed to the principle of "nuda scriptura" rather than "sola scriptura"<sup>28</sup>. By this he meant that they were so exclusively concerned with the Bible that they were deprived of wider insights which would have both helped them to understand the Bible better and enabled them to avoid unhelpful attempts to copy the Bible in a simplistic manner.

There is some force in this argument. The Anabaptists would not have quarrelled with those who accused them of believing that ordinary people could understand the Bible. They were suspicious of scholarship and the imposition of external theological grids on the Bible that might water down its demanding message<sup>29</sup>. But this did not mean that they gave no attention to issues of interpretation<sup>30</sup>; indeed, it could be argued that for them hermeneutics was especially important in that they were setting aside traditional interpretive frameworks that the Reformers may have used uncritically. Perhaps their freedom from such traditions enabled them to produce fresh hermeneutical insights<sup>31</sup>.

Other features of the Anabaptist approach to Scripture preclude their being labelled as fundamentalists. First, many of them held to a distinction between the Bible and the Word of God which would be quite

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<sup>28</sup>George, Timothy: Theology of the Reformers (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1987) 81.

<sup>29</sup>See, for example, Rideman, Peter: Confession of Faith 1545 (Rifton, New York: Plough Publishing House, 1970) 198.

<sup>30</sup>See, for example, the guides to biblical interpretation provided by the leaders, mentioned above.

<sup>31</sup>On this, see below at pp74ff.

alien to fundamentalist thinking<sup>32</sup>. Second, they did not hold to a mechanical view of inspiration, as is normal with fundamentalists. Torsten Bergsten has written about Marpeck that he did not represent an "orthodox verbal inspiration theory, but rather his view of inspiration can be characterised as a combination of the theory of real and personal inspiration"<sup>33</sup>. This understanding of inspiration opens the door to reflection about how Scripture is to be interpreted.

Finally, the Anabaptists did not elevate the Bible above Jesus Christ (as fundamentalism tends to do in practice, if not in theory). Jurgen Moltmann has written that: "The Reformation principle *sola scriptura* took the place of the basic principle *solus Christus*"<sup>34</sup>. This could not be said of the Anabaptists, whose focus on Jesus always took pre-eminence over their view of Scripture<sup>35</sup>. Probably more than any other group in the sixteenth century, the Anabaptists were delivered from fundamentalism by their Christocentrism<sup>36</sup>. Richard Gardner's comment on Menno applies throughout the Anabaptism movement: "his biblicism is not a fundamentalist biblicism which ascribes to Scripture an independent status of its own. Rather it is a biblicism under the lordship of Jesus Christ"<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup>See below at pp218ff.

<sup>33</sup>EBI 84. See also Beachey, Grace 152.

<sup>34</sup>Moltmann, Jurgen: The Crucified God (London: SCM Press, 1974) 116.

<sup>35</sup>See below at p121. See also Kraus: "A Brief Autobiographical Account", in Kauffman, Appraisals 4.

<sup>36</sup>See below at p121.

<sup>37</sup>Gardner, Richard: "Menno Simons: A Study in Anabaptist Theological Self-Understanding and Methodology" MQR (XXXIX) 107.



With regard, therefore, to the charges of bibliolatry and fundamentalism, it would seem that neither has demonstrated that the Anabaptists had a view of Scripture which would necessarily prevent them from developing a sophisticated hermeneutic. But "biblicism" may refer to the avoidance of doctrinal confessions, theological systems and philosophical considerations<sup>38</sup>. Some have argued that biblicism in this sense prevented the Anabaptists from developing a coherent hermeneutic. Willem Balke, for example, suggested that the Anabaptists "had little regard for sound doctrine as such" and reported Calvin's opinion that their "biblicism and lack of doctrinal concern was therefore the trapdoor that opened upon impurity of doctrine"<sup>39</sup>. This seems a rather circular argument. One of the hesitations the Anabaptists expressed about theological systems was that they simply perpetuated themselves and dodged the radical implications of the Bible. They feared that reading the Bible from a settled and systematic theological standpoint would result in eisegesis rather than exegesis, and the subjection of Scripture to human philosophy, reason and theological considerations<sup>40</sup>.

Anabaptist hermeneutics shared two features with their approach to many issues: radical freedom from traditional authority and a dislike of systematising truth. The former resulted in the development of a rather different hermeneutic from that common among the Reformers. This hermeneutic the Reformers dismissed as irresponsible. Rather than endorsing this

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<sup>38</sup>See Friedmann, "Essence" 5.

<sup>39</sup>Balke, Willem: Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 326-7.

<sup>40</sup>See Keeney, Dutch 32; Klaassen, Neither 37.

judgment, it is possible to contrast the two kinds of hermeneutics to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of both.

The latter feature requires further investigation. Anabaptism did not produce systematic theologians like Luther and Calvin. Their interest tended to be pragmatic rather than intellectual, focusing on obeying Scripture rather than analysing and categorising its doctrines. Nor did they have the opportunity to produce many theological treatises. Many of their best thinkers died young, before they had developed their ideas to the point where they could have been systematically presented, or had the time and freedom to write at length<sup>41</sup>. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is no definitive Anabaptist statement on hermeneutics. But it is unnecessary to conclude from this that no coherent hermeneutic can be discovered from their writings. There are, in fact, some quite substantial discussions of hermeneutical issues, particularly in the writings of those leaders who lived into the second generation of Anabaptism. Menno Simons and Dirk Phillips both contributed thoughtful statements of methodology with copious examples of how these should be applied. And Pilgram Marpeck's 800 page concordance, the "Testamentserleutterung"<sup>42</sup>, is an extensive treatment of the relationship between the Testaments. There are also, in the writings of various Anabaptists, sections which touch on specific hermeneutical issues, such as the use and misuse of allegory, the

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<sup>41</sup>Estep, Story 130.

<sup>42</sup>The "Testamentserleutterung" was produced by Marpeck and his colleagues between 1544 and 1550. It contained an introduction in which the principles were spelled out on which the rest of the concordance was based. Although this work was aimed particularly at challenging the approach of Schwenckfeld it remains a significant statement of Marpeck's hermeneutical approach on a crucial issue. See Blough, Neal: Christologie Anabaptiste (Geneve: Editions Labor et Fides, 1984) 38-9.

Spirit's interpretive role and the relationship between the Testaments<sup>43</sup>.

But assessments of Anabaptist hermeneutics based on these sources must be augmented by considering how Anabaptist congregations functioned and how biblical texts were used in practice. In hermeneutics, as in many other areas, Anabaptists functioned pragmatically, intuitively and situationally, rather than systematically and theoretically<sup>44</sup>. The task of assembling such a hermeneutic is more time-consuming and more open to debate than it would be if there were an authoritative treatise available on the subject, but it may yield equally significant results.

The provisional conclusion of this examination of the Anabaptists' alleged biblicism is that the term is applicable to them only in a limited way, and that, contrary to certain evaluations, they approached Scripture with a definite hermeneutic, the content of which is the subject of this study. The extent to which this hermeneutic was derived from or developed in opposition to the Reformers' principles must next be examined.

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<sup>43</sup>See, for example, Hubmaier in Armour, Baptism 28; Adler in Klassen, Peter J: The Economics of Anabaptism (The Hague: Mouton & Co, 1964) 124; Sattler in Snyder, Sattler 164.

<sup>44</sup>See Kasdorf, Hans: "The Anabaptist Approach to Mission", in Shenk, Anabaptism 68.



#### D. A Distinctive Hermeneutic ?

Scholarly opinion is divided regarding the degree to which the Reformers effected a decisive shift in hermeneutical practice<sup>1</sup>. The medieval era had seen a gradual transition from patristic exegetical theology, with the Alexandrian allegorical methodology in the ascendant but challenged periodically by the Antiochene emphasis on more literal interpretation<sup>2</sup>. Significant figures in the area of hermeneutics included Thomas Aquinas, Peter Lombard, William of Occam, Nicholas of Lyra, Faber Stapulensis, Lefevre and, on the eve of the Reformation, Erasmus<sup>3</sup>. The system the Reformers inherited was complex, well-established and tied firmly to the doctrinal and ecclesiastical requirements of the Catholic Church.

The Reformers expressed their determination to free Scripture from subordination to church doctrine and tradition in their rallying cry *sola scriptura*. However, Scripture still needed to be interpreted and the

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<sup>1</sup>See Grant, Robert M: A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible (London: A & C Black, 1965) 102; McGrath, Intellectual 140; Ebeling, Gerhard: Luther (London: Collins, 1972) 102ff; Stuhlmacher, Peter: Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977) 32; Ramm, Bernard: Protestant Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1970) 52; Bird, Phyllis A: The Bible as the Church's Book (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982) 43-4. Hagen, Kenneth: The Bible in the Churches (New York: Paulist press, 1985) 22.

<sup>2</sup>See Wood, James D: The Interpretation of the Bible (London: Duckworth & Co, 1958) 71; Smalley, Beryl: The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964) 19-20.

<sup>3</sup>On these theologians, see Wood, Interpretation 80-4; Smalley, Study 45, 298-305, 368; Grant, Short 97ff; McGrath, Intellectual 153ff; Krentz, Historical-Critical 7; Rogers, Jack B & McKim, Donald K: The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) 43-47, 82-3.

Reformers developed guidelines for this. It is beyond the scope of this study to explore in any detail these guidelines or their relationship with earlier methods, but a brief survey of the Reformers' hermeneutical principles is necessary to appreciate the context within which Anabaptist hermeneutics developed.

The Reformers seem to have adopted a common hermeneutic. There were differences of emphasis, and some issues on which they disagreed with each other had hermeneutical undertones<sup>4</sup>. But most scholars would accept that "hermeneutics was not a polemical issue among the major reformers"<sup>5</sup>. Many scholars have tried to encapsulate the Reformers' distinctive contribution to hermeneutics<sup>6</sup>. Significant features included the following: commitment to the "plain sense" of Scripture; emphasising the right of all believers to read, discuss and interpret Scripture; refusing to let biblical interpretation be governed by ecclesiastical tradition; and concern with the literal sense of texts rather than allegorical meanings. These elements overlap, but considering each separately, though artificial, helps in addressing two important issues: first, how these principles were implemented in practice and what qualifications were placed on them; and second, how the principles differed from medieval hermeneutics.

The first issue is important because the Anabaptists often agreed with the Reformers' principles but accused them of applying these inconsistently.

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<sup>4</sup>An obvious example was the dispute between Luther and Zwingli on eucharistic doctrine. See EBI 29.

<sup>5</sup>Dyck, in EBI 29.

<sup>6</sup>Wenger, John C: Even Unto Death (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1961) 56; Grant, Short 102; McGrath, Intellectual 138; Wood, Interpretation 87, 92.

The second relates to the assessment of the significance of Anabaptist hermeneutics. Was it an offshoot from a major shift in hermeneutics, or a divergent development from medieval hermeneutics that paralleled the Reformers' innovations ?

(1) The "plain sense" of Scripture.

The principle of *sola scriptura* not only emphasised the Bible's authority for life and doctrine (thereby curtailing the role of tradition) but implied that Scripture was sufficient in and of itself. None of the Reformers, however, dismissed hermeneutics as unnecessary, for it was recognised that, however much the Bible's authority was acknowledged, it still needed to be understood. A proverbial expression, quoted with approval by Luther, summed up this issue: "The scripture has a wax nose". He and others realised that it could be regarded as authoritative, yet its message could be distorted by arbitrary interpretations<sup>7</sup>.

Nevertheless, the Reformers were confident that the plain meaning of Scripture could be discovered without resort to complicated procedures. Zwingli spoke about the "prevenient clarity" of Scripture, regarding it as self-interpreting and self-authenticating. He said: "I understand Scripture only in the way that it interprets itself by the Spirit of God. It does not require any human opinion"<sup>8</sup>. This confidence was based partly on a reliance on reason and common sense, an expectation that anyone coming to Scripture with integrity and an open mind could discern its meaning (and he believed sincerely that he knew this meaning and that others would

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<sup>7</sup>See Ebeling, Luther 95ff.

<sup>8</sup>George, Theology 128.



come to agree with him<sup>9</sup>); and partly on the role of the Holy Spirit.

Timothy George paraphrased Zwingli's conviction as follows: "the same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles to write the Scriptures must be present to confirm and persuade us of its truth"<sup>10</sup>.

Luther shared this confidence<sup>11</sup>, although he seems to have been more aware than Zwingli of the difficulties that remained. As Gerhard Ebeling commented<sup>12</sup>: "He never doubted that the will of God was revealed and comprehensible to men solely through the holy scripture. This did not yet mean that he was certain how this was so. There are many difficulties in a formal scriptural principle." Luther's rule, though, was to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture, using clearer passages to illuminate more obscure texts<sup>13</sup>.

Bucer, too, was confident that Scripture was sufficient to provide guidelines for its own interpretation. He regarded his theological programme as an attempt to return to the true source, the Bible, and to interpret this in terms of its own parameters, rather than in terms of an imposed hermeneutical framework. More than most of the Reformers, he emphasised the role of the Holy Spirit as the interpreter of Scripture<sup>14</sup>.

Such was the principle. The Anabaptists, however, asked questions about

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<sup>9</sup>Potter, Zwingli 172-3.

<sup>10</sup>George, Theology 128. See also Potter, Zwingli 172.

<sup>11</sup>See Maier, End 55.

<sup>12</sup>Ebeling, Luther 95ff.

<sup>13</sup>See Wood, Interpretation 89; Stacey, David: Interpreting the Bible (London: Sheldon Press, 1976) 87. Bullinger, too, employed and taught the use of this principle (see RR 593).

<sup>14</sup>McGrath, Intellectual 171-2.

how this principle operated in practice. Was the confidence placed in reason justified ? On what grounds could the Reformers claim to have the correct interpretation and dismiss opposing views ? How did the Spirit actually guide their understanding of Scripture ? To what extent were they influenced by doctrinal presuppositions and extra-biblical factors ?

By comparison with medieval hermeneutics, the Reformers placed considerable emphasis on the role of reason and the possibility of understanding the Bible without reference to the opinions of councils and scholars<sup>15</sup>.

The phrase "prevenient clarity" would not have come naturally to most medieval exegetes. Perhaps such a phrase reflected more the enthusiasm and confidence of the new movement than the Reformers' mature opinions, but it accurately expressed their conviction that Scripture was comprehensible and accessible to all believers. This was a substantial shift of attitude, even if interpretive difficulties were swept aside thereby<sup>16</sup>.

## (2) The right of "private interpretation"

Once it is proclaimed that Scripture is sufficient as its own interpreter and that extra-biblical resources are not needed, it follows that all believers can understand and apply it. The Reformers certainly gave the impression of encouraging this, in their statements and actions, in particular by their involvement in translating the Bible into the vernacular and distributing it widely. Luther defended the right of

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<sup>15</sup>See Potter, Zwingli 190; Krentz, Historical-Critical 8; Stacey, Interpreting 86.

<sup>16</sup>McGrath, Intellectual 140, 150.

private interpretation<sup>17</sup>, and Zwingli insisted that the interpretation of Scripture should not be subjected to the approval of any individual or group<sup>18</sup>. Duncan Ferguson concluded that "in reaction to the Catholic Church's reluctance to allow laypeople access to the Bible...they believed that the Bible was sufficiently clear for all Christians to read it, and it was reprehensible to them that any Christian should be forbidden from doing so"<sup>19</sup>.

However, it soon became clear that there were limits on this right of private interpretation, limits which were probably inherent from the beginning<sup>20</sup> but which were spelled out in response to challenges from Anabaptists and others who claimed to follow this principle but reached different conclusions from those the Reformers reached.

Three inter-connected reservations were imposed on this right of private interpretation: first, conclusions reached by private individuals should agree with those taught by accredited church leaders<sup>21</sup>; second, scholarship was important in attaining a correct understanding<sup>22</sup>; and third,

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<sup>17</sup>See Wenger, Even 56. In his early years, Luther emphasised the importance of the Bible being read by "Herr Omnes" (his term for "everyman") and of theology being developed on this basis: see McGrath, Intellectual 138. He also said that a layman may be correct in his interpretation and has the right to disagree with the Pope: see EBI 46.

<sup>18</sup>See Wood, Interpretation 94.

<sup>19</sup>Ferguson, Duncan: Biblical Hermeneutics (London: SCM Press, 1987) 28.

<sup>20</sup>See Wenger, Even 56.

<sup>21</sup>Potter, Zwingli 172.

<sup>22</sup>Zwingli, for example, relied not only on common sense but also on "the best available scholarship as the necessary conditions for the true interpretation of the Bible": Wood, Interpretation 94 (italics mine).



there was an emphasis on the need to read the original languages in which the Bible had been written. As Alister McGrath observed, this was "not without its ironies" in that a movement ostensibly dedicated to making Scripture available to everyone "actually inhibited this very possibility through an insistence upon the necessity of approaching the biblical text in its original language"<sup>23</sup>. The result of imposing these limitations, according to the Anabaptists, was that interpretation had been liberated from the monopoly of Pope and priests only to be subjected to the monopoly of preachers and scholars<sup>24</sup>.

The shift the Reformers effected from medieval hermeneutics can be seen either as a major change (if the bare principle is in view) or as a less significant one (if the various limitations are considered). Some scholars have concluded that the Reformers achieved a good balance here: James Wood, for example, wrote that Luther and Calvin managed to "free the question of the interpretation of the Bible from the tight rein of the Church on the one hand, and from the arbitrary judgment of the private individual on the other"<sup>25</sup>. The Anabaptists, however, were not persuaded that this freedom was worth much in practice<sup>26</sup>. Although they agreed with the Reformers about freeing interpretation from ecclesiastical control and were not suggesting that unbridled individualism would produce helpful

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<sup>23</sup>McGrath, Intellectual 138.

<sup>24</sup>See Potter, Zwingli 172-3; Ebeling, Luther 18.

<sup>25</sup>Wood, Interpretation 87.

<sup>26</sup>Coutts, Alfred: Hans Denck (Edinburgh: Macniven & Wallace, 1927) 114. He concluded that Anabaptism "was a distinct reaction against the limitation of the spiritual freedom which Luther proclaimed but sought to restrict in various ways."

results, they were not convinced that the Reformers had got the balance right. They had an alternative approach, by comparison with which the shift made by the Reformers appears relatively slight<sup>27</sup>.

### (3) Freedom from ecclesiastical traditions

This was a crucial Reformation issue as Reformer after Reformer chose to obey Scripture rather than the Church's dictates. The relationship between Scripture and Church traditions was exposed to critical scrutiny as rarely before<sup>28</sup>. Emphasis on the "plain sense" of Scripture implied that ecclesiastical approval of interpretations was unnecessary; and commitment to the right of private interpretation meant that such approval was intrusive and unjustified. With reference to his practice of dispensing with the official channels of approved interpretation - pope, councils, schoolmen and Fathers - Zwingli insisted, "God's Word can be understood by a man without any human direction"<sup>29</sup>. Calvin, likewise, insisted on the Bible's supremacy over human traditions and emphasised the Holy Spirit's role in illuminating believers<sup>30</sup>. And Melanchthon was clear about the non-binding character of extra-biblical traditions<sup>31</sup>.

One limitation of this freedom from ecclesiastical control has already been noted, namely, the Reformers' insistence on the role of scholars and

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<sup>27</sup>See below at pp229ff.

<sup>28</sup>Ebeling, Luther 95.

<sup>29</sup>George, Theology 128. See also the summary of Zwingli's scornful dismissal of non-biblical writers in Stephens, W Peter: The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) 53-5.

<sup>30</sup>George, Theology 128; Wood, Interpretation 87.

<sup>31</sup>George, Theology 274.

pastors in instructing ordinary believers (who could have been forgiven for thinking that they had simply exchanged one set of infallible interpreters for another). Nor did the Reformers totally abandon the role of tradition. Although they were clear that Scripture was primary and were willing to jettison anything, however venerable, that they regarded as contrary to Scripture, they continued to respect ecclesiastical traditions. Timothy George wrote that "it was never simply a question of Scripture or tradition, Holy Writ or Holy Church." He noted that "Luther argued for the coinherence of Scripture and tradition, Holy Writ and Holy Church, while never wavering in his commitment to the priority of the former"<sup>32</sup>. The Anabaptists' criticism was that in practice ecclesiastical traditions significantly influenced the way in which Scripture was interpreted, because the Reformers were more bound by such traditions than they admitted<sup>33</sup>.

A further limiting factor was the Reformers' concern to retain the support of the political authorities. It is arguable that this inhibited the Reformers from exploring some of the more radical biblical themes and significantly affected their hermeneutic. The Anabaptists accused the Reformers of so deferring to these authorities that biblical teaching was misinterpreted or set aside<sup>34</sup>. In Zürich especially, but also in other centres of the Reformation, the political authorities assumed responsibi-

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<sup>32</sup>George, Theology 182.

<sup>33</sup>See Potter, Zwingli 191.

<sup>34</sup>This was the heart of the disagreement between Zwingli and his more radical disciples in the early 1520's. The Anabaptists sometimes dismissed state church preachers as "hirelings", who could not be expected to teach the truth: see, for example, Weninger, in AIO 307.



lity for authorising interpretive conclusions. Alister McGrath commented: "whatever the hermeneutics of the early theological proponents of the Reformation may have been, a secondary hermeneutic of political character was at least on occasion instrumental in the propagation of that movement"<sup>35</sup>. The Anabaptists feared that this secondary hermeneutic was in danger of becoming primary, and they were convinced that this was illegitimate<sup>36</sup>.

Another area, which marked a shift from normal medieval practice, but which further limited the application of the principle of freedom from ecclesiastical control, concerned the relationship between doctrine and Scripture. Patristic theology tended to interpret Scripture in the light of doctrinal beliefs but the link between doctrine and biblical interpretation was gradually loosened in the Middle Ages<sup>37</sup>. The Reformers disagreed with this development, however, and reasserted the importance of interpreting Scripture in line with doctrinal commitments<sup>38</sup>. Scripture must be understood in relation to justification by faith and the work of Christ. Hermeneutics was tied to pre-existing doctrinal assumptions. Luther urged that Scripture be approached through the "filter" of the catechism, which would provide a framework for its interpretation<sup>39</sup>. Calvin insisted that to attempt to go back to the Bible while ignoring or

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<sup>35</sup>McGrath, Intellectual 173.

<sup>36</sup>Horsch, Mennonites 36, 356.

<sup>37</sup>Grant, Short 92.

<sup>38</sup>Grant, Short 92.

<sup>39</sup>McGrath, Intellectual 138. Luther insisted that interpretation had to be congruent with the "general norm" of the Word of God: see Wood, Interpretation 89. But who is to say, and on what basis, what this norm consists of ?

rejecting dogmatic theology was naive and would lead to dangerous consequences<sup>40</sup>. Melanchthon, too, taught that theology may be organised around a single doctrine, which effectively provided the key to the understanding of Scripture. For him, as for Luther, this was the doctrine of justification by faith alone<sup>41</sup>.

The Anabaptists felt that using such a doctrinal filter meant filtering out other issues that were arguably equally important but did not fit neatly into the Reformers' main emphases<sup>42</sup>. Such a filter might hinder true interpretation rather than clarifying Scripture. It was a different but equally unhelpful way of reasserting traditional ecclesiastical and creedal authority<sup>43</sup>. Their hermeneutic was thus more radical than the Reformers' and yet closer to the medieval approach.

#### (4) The triumph of the literal sense

The dominant feature of Reformation hermeneutics in many assessments of this period is the Reformers' commitment to the literal sense of

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<sup>40</sup>Balke, Calvin 327.

<sup>41</sup>MacGrath, Intellectual 67. Jurgen Moltmann summarised the somewhat circular process of interpreting Scripture in accordance with certain doctrines and yet attempting to root these in Scripture itself. He wrote: "For Protestantism the basis and standard of church doctrines came to be that they are in accordance with scripture. And in its turn, the standard of what was in accord with the scripture was for Luther the justifying gospel" (Moltmann, Power 116).

<sup>42</sup>Estep, Anabaptist 133.

<sup>43</sup>Davis, Anabaptism 40.

Scripture<sup>44</sup>. Many scholars have regarded the triumph of the literal sense and abandoning (or at least radical restriction) of other senses as one of their primary achievements. John Wenger's comment is typical: "The historic allegorical method of interpretation...justly met its end in the reformers of the sixteenth century. God used men like Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin to do away with the 'monkey business' of allegorization (as Luther called it), and to lead the church once more to a better hermeneutic"<sup>45</sup>.

Clearly, renewed emphasis was placed on the literal sense of Scripture, but some qualifications need to be placed on this "triumph". First, it is not always clear what "literal sense" means, as the term carries various connotations which lead to different interpretations of the same texts. It may mean "the author's original intention" and was used thus in medieval times by Thomas Aquinas and others. For some in the Reformation era the author's intention was crucial to understanding the text<sup>46</sup>. For others, the literal sense implied that what was actually written down, the text itself, was the primary object of investigation rather than authorial intent. This was the view of the more radical Karlstadt. Karlstadt's view appealed to many in his own generation and it has gained many adherents

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<sup>44</sup>The distinction between "plain sense" and "literal sense" separates the issues of the clarity of Scripture and the perspective from which it is viewed. It could be argued that the allegorical meaning is crucial and that this can be derived as the "plain sense" of Scripture. Alternatively, it could be argued that the literal meaning is crucial but that exegetical tools are needed to elucidate this.

<sup>45</sup>Wenger, Even 56. See also George, Theology 81ff; McGrath, Intellectual 171-2.

<sup>46</sup>See, for example, comments on Gerson in McGrath, Intellectual 165-6.



among the heirs of the Reformation since<sup>47</sup>. But it was not how Luther and the other main Reformers approached Scripture, even if its popularity since has encouraged people to attribute it to them.

To call the Reformers champions of the literal sense of Scripture must, therefore, be qualified by the way in which they understood this.

"Literal" did not always mean literal in the strict sense that Karlstadt proposed. Another qualification is that some Reformers continued to use the Quadriga<sup>48</sup>, at least to some extent. Gerhard Ebeling noted that the early Luther "expressly affirmed this traditional fourfold meaning of scripture" and concluded that "it was actually of value to him as he progressed towards the Reformation understanding of the scripture"<sup>49</sup>. And Alister McGrath referred to Zwingli's liking for the tropological sense of Scripture, although this term is not used by him<sup>50</sup>.

For Luther, in particular, the primary sense of Scripture was Christological. The literal sense did not refer to the historical meaning of the text so much as to its Christological meaning. "To begin with Jesus Christ as the fundamental meaning and utterance of the holy scripture became Luther's basic hermeneutical principle"<sup>51</sup>. It is important to add,

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<sup>47</sup>McGrath, Intellectual 166.

<sup>48</sup>The traditional system of interpretation that sought for four different meanings in biblical texts - literal, allegorical, tropological and anagogical. See McGrath, Intellectual 153; Grant, Short 94; George, Theology 81ff

<sup>49</sup>Ebeling, Luther 102. See also McGrath, Intellectual 153-4.

<sup>50</sup>McGrath, Intellectual 169. See also Stephens, Zwingli 75-77.

<sup>51</sup>Ebeling, Luther 108. See also Carter, Charles S: The Reformers and Holy Scripture (London: Thynne & Jarvis, 1928) 59.

however, that for Luther, Melanchthon<sup>52</sup> and others, "Christological" primarily referred to the work of Christ and the principle of justification by faith. This was adopted as Scripture's central meaning and the hermeneutical key that would open up every passage<sup>53</sup>.

Formally, therefore, the Reformers rejected the allegorical approach, but in practice Christological and even tropological considerations exercised influence. Ben Ollenburger acknowledged Luther's insistence on the literal sense, but believed that his hermeneutic "can best be understood as continuing the tradition of the medieval period"<sup>54</sup>. Gerhard Ebeling, on the other hand, concluded that Luther's principles "implicitly and inevitably implied the abandonment of the fourfold meaning of Scripture"<sup>55</sup>. William Keeney<sup>56</sup> offered a mediating view: "Luther and Melanchthon suspected the allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures. But the church had used the method too long and it had at least some sanction in the New Testament so that they could not deny its validity altogether."

The Reformers effected an important shift from medieval hermeneutics on this issue, but perhaps not as decisive as is sometimes thought. The

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<sup>52</sup>McGrath, Intellectual 67.

<sup>53</sup>Grant, Short, 106 suggested that Calvin used a more objective type of interpretation that was less Christological, but Stauffer identified sola gratia as Calvin's hermeneutical key. See Farley, Benjamin W: John Calvin: Treatises against the Anabaptists and against the Libertines (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1982) 26.

<sup>54</sup>EBI 46. See also McGrath, Intellectual 150.

<sup>55</sup>Ebeling, Luther 108.

<sup>56</sup>Keeney, Dutch 37. On Luther, see also Ramm, Protestant 54; Rogers & McKim, Authority 86. On Calvin, see Stuhlmacher, Historical 34; Rogers & McKim, Authority 115.

Anabaptists freely acknowledged their dependence on the Reformers (especially on Zwingli<sup>57</sup>) in this area - much to their chagrin at times ! - but they understood the literal sense along similar lines to Karlstadt. They criticised the Reformers for inconsistencies and for failing to interpret literally some of the most radical and challenging New Testament teachings<sup>58</sup>. However, the Anabaptists also made use of allegorical methods in their interpretation of the Old Testament. Both sides accused each other of excessive literalism and allegorisation. The long-running debate between the "Alexandrian" and "Antiochene" approaches was continuing<sup>59</sup>.

This survey indicates that the Reformers made significant changes in principle in the area of hermeneutics, but that in practice the changes were less substantial. My thesis regarding Anabaptist hermeneutics is that on this issue, as on others, they should be seen as "stepchildren of the Reformers". They owed much to the Reformers, but they were not simply radicalisers of Reformation ideas. They brought their own perspectives to bear on hermeneutics, some of which were closer to pre-Reformation approaches<sup>60</sup>. That Reformers and Anabaptists both accepted some aspects of medieval hermeneutics is neither surprising nor a criticism. That they shared some new perspectives is well-established and explicable in terms

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<sup>57</sup>Potter, Zwingli 172-3.

<sup>58</sup>Unlike the Anabaptists, who interpreted the New Testament literally and restricted allegorising to their interpretation of the Old Testament, some Reformers allegorised New Testament texts also. See, for example, on Zwingli: Stephens, Theology 79.

<sup>59</sup>This will be explored in detail below at pp184ff.

<sup>60</sup>See Rutschman, LaVerne: "Anabaptism and Liberation Theology", in Schipani, Daniel S (ed): Freedom and Discipleship (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989) 59.



possession of other insights that were different from either medieval or Reformed hermeneutics will be explored in subsequent sections.

#### E. A Coherent Hermeneutic ?

In the previous section the Reformers could be considered as a group with a basically homogeneous hermeneutic. But this cannot be assumed in the case of the Anabaptists. One difference between the two movements was the absence of any Anabaptist theologian of comparable representative status to Luther, Zwingli or Calvin<sup>62</sup>. Two of their foremost theological thinkers - Balthasar Hubmaier and Pilgram Marpeck - were somewhat peripheral in terms of their lasting influence. Hubmaier is still regarded as an atypical Anabaptist because of his views on certain issues<sup>63</sup>, while Marpeck left no churches that looked to him as founder or source of authority<sup>64</sup>. Others who might have fulfilled this role died as martyrs or

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<sup>61</sup>Oyer, Lutheran 89; Beachey, Grace 129; Weaver, J Denny: "Discipleship Redefined - Four Sixteenth Century Anabaptists" MQR LIV 279.

<sup>62</sup>Estep, Anabaptist 130.

<sup>63</sup>In particular his attempt to convert a whole parish to Anabaptism, and his views on warfare and other ethical issues. On Hubmaier generally see Bergsten, Hubmaier; Vedder, Henry C: Balthasar Hubmaier (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1905); and Pipkin, H Wayne & Yoder, John H: Balthasar Hubmaier (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989).

<sup>64</sup>On Marpeck see Moore, John A: Anabaptist Portraits (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984); and Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck.

from illness before they had written at length<sup>65</sup>. One man who wrote extensively and was highly influential both during his lifetime and for subsequent generations was Menno Simons, but he was not well enough known to or accepted by the Swiss and Austrian branches of Anabaptism to act as spokesman for the whole movement<sup>66</sup>.

It is impossible, therefore, to study Anabaptist hermeneutics through the writings of one or two representatives. Nor would this be true to Anabaptism if sufficient material were available to make the attempt<sup>67</sup>. Another difficulty is that Anabaptism was divided into geographically separated groups, gathered around influential leaders who met infrequently with other regional leaders. There were, not surprisingly, significant<sup>68</sup> differences of emphasis and approach among these groups. This can be seen as hindering the discovery of a coherent Anabaptist hermeneutic, or as a positive factor - the variants may enrich the hermeneutic and explicate certain features, and may confirm that certain aspects were typical of the whole movement rather than simply local expressions.

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<sup>65</sup>Obvious candidates would have included Michael Sattler, the probable author of the Schleithem Confession, who was martyred shortly after this, and Conrad Grebel who died after an illness before he could develop his ideas further. On Sattler, see Snyder, Sattler and Yoder, Legacy. On Grebel, see Bender, Harold S: Conrad Grebel (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950), and Ruth, John L: Conrad Grebel, Son of Zurich (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1975).

<sup>66</sup>He is, however, an important source for this study and will be referred to frequently. On Menno generally see Bender, Harold S: Menno Simon's Life and Writings (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1936); and Littell, Tribute.

<sup>67</sup>See below at pp224ff for an elaboration of this theme.

<sup>68</sup>The significance of the differences will be examined in subsequent sections insofar as these relate to hermeneutics.

A third difficulty is the fluidity of early Anabaptism. There was time and leisure to address only the most pressing issues, so many hermeneutical and theological matters were not explored as systematically as they might have been in other circumstances. Again, however, this can be regarded positively, in that the principles of interpretation which were spelled out were presumably those reckoned to be of crucial importance. It can also be argued that the Anabaptists' suffering and powerlessness gave them a distinctive perspective on hermeneutical issues<sup>69</sup>.

A fourth factor is that the Anabaptist hermeneutic was developed in debate with opponents as well as within friendly meetings. This was true to some extent of the Reformers' hermeneutic, but they were often in a dominant position rather than having to defend their stance in face of threats and coercion. Anabaptist leaders were opposed not only by the Reformers and by the Catholic Church, but also by other radical groups, such as the Spiritualists. On some issues their stance appears to differ depending on which opponents they were confronting<sup>70</sup>. This must be recognised in attempting to discern their hermeneutical norms.

Anabaptist writings reveal some variation on hermeneutics. The extent and significance of this will require investigation. There are several documents - letters and tracts - in which Anabaptist leaders expressed

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<sup>69</sup>Perhaps akin to the "hermeneutical privilege of the poor" in Latin American Liberation Theology. This will be explored in a later section. See below at pp283-4.

<sup>70</sup>Marpeck, for example, debated vigorously with the Reformer, Martin Bucer, but also wrote extensively against the Silesian nobleman and leading Spiritualist, Caspar Schwenckfeld.



criticisms of one another<sup>71</sup>. There were also instances of dependence on one another and recognition of shared insights<sup>72</sup>. And the crucial Schleithem conference in 1527 was a good example of several Anabaptist leaders exploring their differences and coming to a common view on important issues<sup>73</sup>.

The assertion that, despite this variation and the difficulties inherent in discovering a common view, there is a single Anabaptist hermeneutic that is coherent and distinctive, will need to be established on the basis of evidence presented in subsequent sections. But there are several indications that support this hypothesis. First, sympathetic scholars have concluded that an Anabaptist hermeneutic does exist<sup>74</sup>. Second, scholars writing from other perspectives have accepted that, whatever their evaluation of it, there is an Anabaptist hermeneutic<sup>75</sup>. Third, many contemporary opponents assumed that the various Anabaptist groups agreed

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<sup>71</sup>For example, Marpeck's correspondence with the Swiss Brethren and their replies. See also the account of Hubmaier's criticisms of the Swiss in Packull, Mysticism 104.

<sup>72</sup>The Swiss Brethren clearly appreciated Hubmaier and valued his contributions to debates in Zürich.

<sup>73</sup>The text of the Confession can be found in Yoder, John H (ed): The Schleithem Confession (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1977). Discussion of the synod can be found in Yoder, Legacy.

<sup>74</sup>This will need to be tested against the primary sources to see whether the result is an abstraction from later methods rather than a fair summary of sixteenth century principles and practices.

<sup>75</sup>See, for example, Balke, Calvin, writing from a Calvinist perspective.

on basic hermeneutical principles<sup>76</sup>. And fourth, that uneducated Anabaptists clearly operated according to certain common principles of biblical interpretation is powerful evidence of a shared hermeneutical outlook across the movement<sup>77</sup>.

Some have attempted to categorise Anabaptists on hermeneutical issues. Alvin Beachey suggested three major groups: those who practised a "hermeneutics of the inner and outer word"; those who used a "hermeneutics of the Letter and the Spirit"; and those who worked with a "hermeneutics of the old and new covenants"<sup>78</sup>. Cornelius Dyck distinguished four groups, relating to Hoffman, Denck, Marpeck and the Swiss Brethren<sup>79</sup>. These groupings will be examined as specific features of Anabaptist hermeneutics are considered. They indicate, however, that the claim that there was a coherent Anabaptist hermeneutic (which both these scholars accepted) need not imply uniformity across the movement.

Indeed, other scholars have stated that on several issues there is not a uniform stance. William Klassen referred to varied approaches to interpreting the Old Testament among Anabaptists<sup>80</sup>. LaVerne Rutschman commented on

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<sup>76</sup>See, for example, Calvin's comments concerning Anabaptist hermeneutics: Balke, Calvin 326-7. Sometimes the Reformers (unwittingly or deliberately) lumped Anabaptists together with other radicals, but those who knew them well (such as Bucer and Zwingli) distinguished between Anabaptists and others and treated the Anabaptists as a coherent group.

<sup>77</sup>Examples from Martyrs' Mirror and elsewhere will be examined below.

<sup>78</sup>Beachey, Grace 130ff.

<sup>79</sup>Dyck, Cornelius J: "The Anabaptist Understanding of the Good News", in Shenk, Anabaptism 25. See also Poettcker, in Dyck, Cornelius J (ed): The Witness of the Holy Spirit (Elkhart: Mennonite World Conference, 1967) 365.

<sup>80</sup>EBI 94.

the different approaches to the relationship between the outer and inner words<sup>81</sup>. And Ross Bender accepted that non-uniformity is true of Anabaptist hermeneutics as a whole<sup>82</sup>. The conviction emerging from this study is that, while uniformity is lacking, coherence is present - and further that the variety may enhance rather than hinder the discovery and analysis of Anabaptist hermeneutics. There are differences, both of emphasis and of substance, which will be explored, but there is sufficient agreement among the major branches of Anabaptism to make possible the study of a definitive Anabaptist hermeneutic.

Subsequent sections will concentrate on six important facets of this Anabaptist hermeneutic:-

- (1) The Bible as Self-interpreting
- (2) Christocentrism
- (3) The Two Testaments
- (4) Spirit and Word
- (5) Congregational Hermeneutics
- (6) Hermeneutics of Obedience

Just as dividing Reformation hermeneutics into separate categories was rather arbitrary, so this list separates elements which overlap and mutually reinforce or restrict one another. However, provided these links

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<sup>81</sup>Rutschman: "Anabaptism and Liberation Theology", in Schipani, Freedom 59.

<sup>82</sup>Bender, Ross: "Seminary and Congregation" MQR XXXIX 175.  
See also Poettcker: "Anabaptist-Mennonite Hermeneutics", in Dyck, Witness 367.



are examined<sup>83</sup>, the division is helpful for the sake of clarity, and justified in terms of the content of each facet.

Some of the facets seem superficially similar to those associated with the Reformers' hermeneutics, but in each case the study will argue that the Anabaptists' approach was distinctive. Their Christocentrism, for example, differed significantly from Luther's Christological approach, although there is common ground. Some areas of disagreement were briefly indicated above and all will be examined in detail below. One final point concerns the nature of the Anabaptist contribution to hermeneutics. Their strength does not lie in academic expertise or exegetical brilliance. As William Klassen wrote: "If by exegesis we mean a study of the Bible based on the original languages then there is a minimum of it among the Anabaptists. And if one can speak of hermeneutics only where there is technical exegesis, then it is equally clear that there is no such thing as hermeneutics among the Anabaptists"<sup>84</sup>. The areas in which the Anabaptists can make a contribution are first, those associated with the contemporary interest in the horizon of the interpreter and the context within which he or she comes to the scriptures<sup>85</sup>; second, their determination to start with Jesus as the key to understanding Scripture<sup>86</sup>; and third, their approach to the related issues of the "plain sense" and the "literal sense" of Scripture<sup>87</sup>. It is this issue of the extent to which Scripture is clear and self-interpreting that the next section will explore.

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<sup>83</sup>See below at pp293ff.

<sup>84</sup>Klassen, William: Covenant and Community (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 12.

<sup>85</sup>The fourth, fifth and sixth distinctives relate to this.

<sup>86</sup>The second and third points relate to this emphasis.

<sup>87</sup>The first point deals with this.

## A Introduction

A crucial component in Anabaptist hermeneutics was the conviction that Scripture is self-interpreting. Because this was so, they argued, ordinary Christians could approach the Bible with confidence. The motto *scriptura sui ipsius interpres*<sup>1</sup> was employed by others in the sixteenth century as well as by Anabaptists, however, so the purpose of this section is to examine how the Anabaptists used this concept, and the closely related concepts of the clarity and sufficiency of Scripture, and to contrast their assumptions and practices with those of their contemporaries.

Anabaptist writings contain many examples of their claim that the Bible was "clear", "plain", "simple" and accessible to ordinary Christians. A selection of these statements will be examined and their significance weighed, in order to understand why they made such confident assertions and what opposing viewpoints they were attempting to counter. The mixture of theological, sociological and pragmatic reasons for their stance on this issue will be explored. And criticisms of this position will also be considered, as will the qualifications which the Anabaptists themselves placed on it.

## B. Simple, Plain and Clear

Statements from various Anabaptist leaders demonstrate the widespread conviction within the movement about the clarity of Scriptures and its

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<sup>1</sup>"Scripture is its own interpreter".

sufficiency without external additions. In 1529, Clemens Adler wrote: "The words of Christ are plainly expressed, distinctly and clearly. They must be permitted to stand in their worth and truth without any of our additions"<sup>2</sup>. It is clear from his writings that Adler approached other parts of the Bible in the same way. He was confident that the words of Scripture were adequate in themselves - "no gloss is necessary", he warned<sup>3</sup> - and exhibited a common Anabaptist suspicion of human additions as liable to detract from the truth and power of the Scriptures, rather than elucidating them.

Balthasar Hubmaier strongly affirmed the right of private interpretation of Scripture and linked this with his conviction that God's word was straightforward enough to be understood and obeyed. "Judge in your consciences", he wrote, "according to the simple word of God. Allow it alone to be the mediator and judge, and you will not go astray"<sup>4</sup>. Unlike the Reformers, who were concerned that lay interpreters were in danger of going astray without the help of authoritative hermeneutical guidelines from scholars and pastors<sup>5</sup>, Hubmaier regarded the adoption of external authorities and opinions as more likely to lead people astray. For Hubmaier, the Scriptures were "clear and transparent and pure and

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<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Klassen, Economics 124.

<sup>3</sup>Klassen, Economics 124.

<sup>4</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 99.

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Luther's scepticism about the reliability of lay interpretation in McGrath, Intellectual 138.



luminous and simple"<sup>6</sup>.

Indeed, so concerned was Hubmaier to discourage reliance on external aids to interpretation that he included his own writings in this category. He told his readers, "You must examine the Scriptures, for they witness to the truth even though I had written nothing. If, however, you desire to read my simple writing, do so without regard to persons, titles, ancient usages and traditions, and without all affectation that might lead you to refuse the truth"<sup>7</sup>. Hubmaier did not preclude learning from the interpretations suggested by others, but warned against investing these with undue authority. The Bible was both authoritative and sufficient.

Pilgram Marpeck agreed. Debating about baptism, he wrote, "We think that, if you take the simple text of the Scriptures and view it directly by faith and leave all subtle, complex speculations behind, then this question can be quite easily solved"<sup>8</sup>. Marpeck, like Hubmaier, was wary of introducing complications rather than accepting biblical texts as they stood. This, he believed, produced much theological wrangling and led to the Scriptures being downgraded. It also caused problems for ordinary Christians. He continued, "Since many people use only their reason and bid farewell to the simple, clear explanation of the text, and force the Scriptures more to their own understanding and pay less attention to the

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<sup>6</sup>Klaassen, "Speaking" 143. As early as 1523, at the second Zurich Disputation, Hubmaier was referring to the "bright, clear Word of God": see Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 24. Similar phrases appear frequently in his writings: see Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 26, 92, 111-2, 113, 479.

<sup>7</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 147.

<sup>8</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 173. On the role of "faith" in biblical interpretation, see below at pp271-2.

meaning of the Scripture, the matter has become so confused and disturbed that the simple people cannot easily understand it"<sup>9</sup>.

In common with other Anabaptist leaders, Marpeck resisted attempts to impose an interpretive grid on Scripture in order to force passages into consistency with preconceived theological positions. He defended the right of private interpretation<sup>10</sup>, and taught that Scripture was sufficient in itself without external additions. He concluded, "We are satisfied with Scripture, and shall not stray from it despite those who speak out against it. Scripture instructs us adequately, and we feel that nothing else may be added"<sup>11</sup>.

The Swiss Brethren exhibited the same confidence from the earliest years of the movement. Writing to Vadian, the Reformer of St Gallen, Conrad Grebel declared: "I believe the Word of God simply by grace, not by artifice"<sup>12</sup>. His colleague, Felix Mantz, wrote shortly before his martyrdom, "I do, however, know for sure that if the only Word be allowed to speak for itself freely and simply, no one will be able to withstand it"<sup>13</sup>. In the record of Mantz' trial, the following statement testifies to the central role that the Bible played in his thinking and his confidence in its clarity: "Felix Mantz gives his answer that the Scriptures and their bases are so firm that they cannot be set aside or overcome... nothing has impelled him to deny infant baptism and to oppose it but the clear and true Scriptures"<sup>14</sup>. Repeatedly, Anabaptists on trial declared

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<sup>9</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 173.

<sup>10</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 179.

<sup>11</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 268.

<sup>12</sup>Harder, Sources 302.

<sup>13</sup>Harder, Sources 314.

<sup>14</sup>Harder, Sources 441.

that their views were not derived from any source other than Scripture, and that Scripture was sufficiently clear to justify these views<sup>15</sup>.

The Dutch Anabaptists shared this view of the clarity and adequacy of Scripture. Menno expressed his confidence in the Bible's clarity: "Above all, brethren, I want you to understand that I do not tolerate human doctrines, clever reasonings, nor twisting of the Scriptures, nor glosses, nor imaginations in regard to this matter, but only the plain Scriptures"<sup>16</sup>. In an age when theological disputes were characterised by arrogance and self-sufficiency on all sides, the Anabaptists frequently urged opponents to instruct them if they were in error, but with the proviso that the plain Scriptures were used for this rather than human reasonings. This is the context of Menno's challenge to his opponents: "If you have plainer Scriptures concerning this...then assist us, and I will by the grace of God change my mind in regard to the matter and accept your view"<sup>17</sup>.

Among the Hutterites, too, the same conviction prevailed, as expressed by Peter Rideman in his Confession of Faith (1545): "For truly here one cannot let reason rule or twist the Scriptures in accordance with human presumption or opinion, for that is futile, but one must give God the honour and leave his command unaltered"<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup>See the examples below at p69.

<sup>16</sup>Simons, Menno: Complete Works 1496-1561 (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956) 452.

<sup>17</sup>Menno, Works 452. For another example of this openness to correction, see Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 268.

<sup>18</sup>Rideman, Confession 198.



Such were the views of major Anabaptist leaders and writers. This commitment to the clarity, simplicity and adequacy of Scripture, this suspicion of external aids to interpretation, and this confidence that ordinary Christians could handle Scripture without being led into error, characterised the whole movement. Some statements from Anabaptists on trial will complete this selection and demonstrate that the leaders' attitudes had clearly enfranchised the membership and had produced tremendous faith and confidence, even in the face of clever questioning and severe pressure.

A conversation between a priest and an imprisoned Anabaptist, Claes de Praet, in 1556, included the following exchange:

Claes: "That which I cannot prove with Scriptures, I will not say."

Priest: "Don't you believe anything but what is written?"

Claes: "No"<sup>19</sup>.

Clearer still is the conversation two years later between an inquisitor and Jacques d'Auchy:

Inquisitor: "You must not govern yourself according to your own understanding, but according to the exposition of the holy teachers, such as St Augustine, Ambrose, and others of the ancient church."

Jacques: "I am well satisfied with St Paul's exposition, without seeking for many other expositions"...

Inquisitor: "It is the word of the holy teachers of the church, whom you reject; behold, here is the cause of your error."

Jacques: "I do not reject them, but I leave them undisturbed; for I find material enough in the Word of God to lay a good foundation, and water of life enough to drink in the pure fountain, without running to the brooks or pools, which are mostly filthy or turpid"<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup>MM 559.

<sup>20</sup>MM 597.

The many references in Anabaptist writings to the clarity and sufficiency of Scripture, of which the above are merely a representative sample, cannot be ignored without failing to appreciate a significant aspect of their hermeneutics. But it is important to assess the meaning of these claims and the points of view that they were attempting to challenge. Many statements were made in polemical writings, as a defence against charges brought by the Reformers or Catholic inquisitors, or to challenge certain beliefs or practices in the state churches.

It could be argued that these claims demonstrate only that the Anabaptists were naively confident in their ability to understand Scripture, and that they simply did not appreciate the problems involved<sup>21</sup>. Alternatively, it might be that these statements merely reflect the sola scriptura principle held by the Reformers and express commitment to the plain sense of the Bible. But the frequency of these claims, their context, and the way in which they are worded, suggests that they have more substance than either of these explanations indicates.

The Anabaptists' concern was that the Reformers were paying lip service to such principles as the plain sense of Scripture and the right of private interpretation, but that in practice these were hedged about with so many qualifications as to deprive them of any power. Their repeated emphasis on Scripture being simple, clear and plain challenged the Reformers' caution and urged a more radical approach. Specifically, they were questioning the

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<sup>21</sup>This was John Oyer's conclusion: "Whereas Protestants were driven to theology to explain their departure from Catholic sacramentalism, the Anabaptists relied on biblical quotations, naively regarded as self-evident, to express their deviation from Protestantism". See Oyer, Lutheran 212.

Reformers' reliance on reason and increasing restriction of interpretation to pastors and scholars; the extent to which they were bound by doctrinal considerations and traditional interpretations; and the use of external means to evade rather than explain the Bible.

1) The place of reason and scholarship.

The Anabaptists did not dismiss reason as an aid to understanding Scripture, but they were less confident than the Reformers that human reasoning, education, knowledge of languages and philosophy were either necessary or effective in elucidating texts<sup>22</sup>. Their concern was twofold. First, if some level of education and reasoning ability was necessary to understand Scripture, the ordinary Christian was in no better position than he had been under Catholicism - he was still dependent on someone else with special skills to tell him what the Bible meant. Second, where reason was relied upon, there was a tendency to impose human ideas and philosophies on Scripture, explaining away rather than explaining texts.

John Yoder discerned among Anabaptists "a serious suspicion of formal learning and of the tools of the scholar. It seemed to them almost unavoidable that such learning would be used as a means of evading the greater meaning of Scripture"<sup>23</sup>. This does not mean that common sense was

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<sup>22</sup>William Keeney concluded that, although "Menno and Dirk were less inclined to trust reason and education than were some of the other Reformers...Menno would never repudiate them absolutely, and at times did acknowledge their value": Keeney, Dutch 32. On the Reformers' confidence in reasoning, see Shiels, William J & Wood, Diana: Studies in Church History Volume 23: Voluntary Religion (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 131.

<sup>23</sup>EBI 21. See also Keeney, Dutch 32.



disregarded, but the Anabaptists were clear that reason and scholarship were tools, not tyrants. As Henry Poettcker wrote, "Menno does not hesitate to ask his reader to consider the 'reasonableness' of his teaching. Together with this, however, he is clear on the fact that reason must be subservient to the Word of God"<sup>24</sup>.

Menno, in particular, expressed many misgivings about the way in which learning and human reason were being used. At one point he cried out: "O God, what are the learned ones and the highly educated masters of this world doing, who try so hard to minimize God's Word and wisdom and so cleverly urge their own foolish reason and wisdom?"<sup>25</sup> In his tract, "On Christian Baptism" (1539), Menno returned to this theme: "Whenever such highly renowned men by their subtle acuteness and clever philosophy try to take from us and pervert the plain ordinances of Christ Jesus and his apostles, we must consider their doctrine in that respect the doctrine of men and false"<sup>26</sup>.

Dirk Phillips shared Menno's suspicion that "reason" was often used as a way of importing prejudices and distortions into biblical interpretation. He quoted a common proverb - "the more learned, the more perverted" - to underline this concern, and linked together "reason" with "one's own opinions"<sup>27</sup>.

Leonhard Schiemer was equally sceptical about the value of intellectual language and philosophical methods. Probably a university man himself, he

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<sup>24</sup>EBI 73.

<sup>25</sup>Menno, Works 126. See also 214.

<sup>26</sup>Menno, Works 242.

<sup>27</sup>Phillips, Enchiridion 175.

wrote in mocking language: "The whole world talks and throws around in the mouth back and forth this little word 'grace'. And in particular our scholars do so, and they do it much like the advanced students reciting from their Aristotle. They then call it *ens reale*, and distinguish between *genus*, *species*, *proprium*, *differentia*, *accidens*, *propositio*, *categorica*. They do not say it in German because they have such a high mind that the German tongue seems to them too low and poor for it"<sup>28</sup>. Similarly, Hoffman demanded that the "power of human reason" be put aside in biblical interpretation. "Our most respected schools are not fountains of divine teaching", he wrote, "but are under the sway of the devilish trinity of Pope, Emperor and false teachers"<sup>29</sup>.

The only legitimate kind of reason, according to the Anabaptists, then, was more or less equated with common sense rather than the skills of academics. They were not advocating emotional, mystical or spiritualistic approaches to Scripture, but confidence that any rational person could understand it<sup>30</sup>. They disagreed with the Reformers about the inability of uneducated people to interpret Scripture. They also disagreed with them about the influence of scholarship and higher education, feeling that on balance such training did more harm than good, obscuring the meaning of

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<sup>28</sup>Quoted in Friedmann, Robert: Hutterite Studies (Goshen: Mennonite Historical Society, 1961) 178.

<sup>29</sup>Quoted in Deppermann, Klaus: Melchior Hoffman (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987) 64.

<sup>30</sup>It is important to emphasize that this claim cannot stand by itself but must be seen in the light of other Anabaptist perspectives on the role of the congregation, the attitude of the interpreter and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture rather than clarifying it<sup>31</sup>. Any hermeneutical assistance provided by Anabaptist leaders must be understood in the light of this basic confidence in the adequacy of Scripture and its accessibility to ordinary rational people.

## 2) The influence of doctrine and tradition.

The Anabaptists believed *sola scriptura* meant that Scripture must be free to challenge all other authorities, however firmly established and however influential. In particular, they were concerned that the authority and adequacy of Scripture were not compromised by giving too much deference to doctrinal beliefs or traditional interpretations. They knew that the Reformers had committed themselves to just such a view of the Bible<sup>32</sup>, but they were not persuaded that the Reformers were being consistent in this. The Anabaptists felt that Scripture was not being allowed to challenge traditional views and accepted doctrines in several important areas. Pre-determined doctrinal emphases seemed to be stifling biblical studies and precluding the openness to fresh revelation that the Anabaptists believed essential for interpretation.

Menno chided the Reformers for tempering their appeal to the Scriptures

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<sup>31</sup>The Anabaptists also doubted the integrity and motivation of scholars. They felt not only that their learning helped scholars dilute the challenge of Scripture by introducing academic complications and qualifications, but also that pride in their abilities hindered their attempts at interpretation because their attitude to Scripture was not right. Menno, for example, counselled: "In my opinion. it would be good for Gellius, since he boasts himself a preacher of the holy Word, to leave his dialectics to the wise ones of the world who, alas, seek their own praise and honor more than they do God's": see Menno, Works 708.

<sup>32</sup>See Potter, Zwingli 172-3.



with human traditions. He quoted favourably remarks of Luther and Melanchthon about the non-binding character of extra-biblical traditions, but then added: "Here Luther and Melanchthon have correctly expressed themselves according to the Scripture, although alas, they did not follow their own advice"<sup>33</sup>.

The Reformers referred frequently to patristic interpreters to support their own conclusions<sup>34</sup>. The Anabaptists were much less inclined to rely on such authorities<sup>35</sup>. They quoted from them on occasions, but almost always with the proviso that patristic opinions were interesting rather than authoritative, and were not to be put on a level with Scripture. Some were rather more dismissive of such interpreters. Bernhard Rothmann, the theologian of Munster, wrote disparagingly: "we have nothing to do with what the ancient or modern scholars have written. We are not concerned about them but only with what we find in the same Holy Scriptures which is God's Word and will...He who holds only to the Scriptures needs no other writings"<sup>36</sup>.

Among uneducated Anabaptists a similar attitude was evident. Joos Kindt, for example, in 1553, complained about his inquisitors' reliance on patristic sources. "Don't speak of Augustine," he asked, "for I do not

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<sup>33</sup>Menno, Works 514.

<sup>34</sup>Although they criticised Catholics for relying on these rather than Scripture just as Anabaptists criticised them for doing (see Ramm, Protestant 55). Zwingli was particularly scornful of relying on patristic writers, but he made use of them in many of his commentaries, as well as quoting Aristotle and other pagan writers. Indeed, in "The Providence of God", he seemed to use biblical quotations to support an argument based on pagan philosophical arguments: see Stephens, Theology 54-5.

<sup>35</sup>EBI 8.

<sup>36</sup>AIO 149.

know him; I hold no doctrine save that of the apostles and prophets, and of the words which our Saviour brought from high heaven, from the mouth of his heavenly Father, and sealed with his precious blood; for this I want to go into the fire; but Augustine, Gregory, Ambrose, these I know not"<sup>37</sup>.

Menno accepted the validity of appeals to earlier theologians provided their opinions were not set alongside Scripture. In his "Reply to Gellius Faber", he wrote: "As to his appeal to Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen, and Augustine, I would reply: If these writers can support their assertions with the Word and ordinance of God, then we will admit that they are right. But if not, then it is the doctrine of men, and accursed by the Scriptures"<sup>38</sup>. Similarly, Hubmaier, in a debate about baptism, chided Oecolampadius: "You speak to me much of Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian, Augustine, councils, histories, and old customs. I must somehow think that you lack the Scriptures, which do not want to come out of the quiver"<sup>39</sup>. The Anabaptists were not concerned with who made a certain statement but with whether or not it was consistent with the Bible.

This attitude seemed unspeakably arrogant to their opponents. An inquisitor rebuked an Anabaptist woman, Claesken, in 1559, with the question: "Do you know better than the holy fathers fifteen hundred years ago ? You

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<sup>37</sup>MM 541.

<sup>38</sup>Menno, Works 695.

<sup>39</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 290. In his Eighteen Theses of 1524 Hubmaier made it clear that his misgivings applied equally to more recent scholars: "All teachings, which God himself did not plant, are in vain, interdicted, and shall be uprooted. Hereby fall to the earth Aristotle, scholastics like Thomas, Scotus, Bonaventure, and Occam, and all teaching that does not spring forth from the Word of God": Yoder & Pipkin, Hubmaier 33.

should think that you are simple." Her reply is typical of the Anabaptists' confidence that scholarship, learning and theological reputation were not the keys to correct hermeneutics: "Though I am simple before men, I am not simple in the knowledge of the Lord. Do you not know that the Lord thanked His Father, that He had hid these things from the wise and prudent, and had revealed them to the simple and unto babes ?"<sup>40</sup>.

The Anabaptists' claim was not that they were more competent interpreters than ancient theologians, but that no human authority must be allowed to govern biblical interpretation or be given such deference as to hinder fresh approaches to biblical truth. They did not jettison such traditional sources altogether, but they insisted they were not binding. As William Keeney wrote about the Dutch Anabaptists: "When they accepted the teachings and practices of Jesus Christ and the apostles as normative, Menno and Dirk propounded a more radical principle of restitution than either Luther or Calvin...The Mennonites considered all later creeds and teachings of the Church Fathers as human opinions"<sup>41</sup>.

Keeney's reference to creeds is a useful starting point from which to consider the Anabaptists' second concern in this area, namely, that doctrinal commitments were governing biblical interpretation rather than vice versa. Their attitude to the creeds was very similar to their attitude to ancient theologians: they were acceptable insofar as they were consistent with the Scriptures. Generally the Anabaptists raised no objections to the contents of the creeds, nor were they accused by their opponents of rejecting them. But they refused to accord them undue

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<sup>40</sup>Both quotations from MM 612.

<sup>41</sup>Keeney, Dutch 39.



respect. Keeney continued: "Menno at one point appealed to the definition of 'the Holy Scriptures and the Nicene Creed'. He also seems to have accepted the Apostolic Symbol as a valid summary of many important points, but only because it agreed with the Scriptures and not as a creed to be dogmatically enforced"<sup>42</sup>.

The Reformers tended towards the Augustinian method of combining theology and biblical interpretation, rather than the approach of Aquinas and others which separated these disciplines<sup>43</sup>. They argued that Scripture must be understood in the light of certain fundamental doctrines - notably justification by faith - and the filter of the catechism must be applied to interpret texts correctly. The Anabaptists rejected this for two reasons: it set up doctrinal formulations over Scripture; and it resulted in a blinkered approach to the Scriptures. A familiar example of the latter point is Luther's well-known distaste for the Epistle of James, because he could not find the theme of justification by faith in it<sup>44</sup>. For Anabaptists, *sola scriptura* meant Scripture judging doctrinal commitments

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<sup>42</sup>Keeney, Dutch 39. See also Cornelius Dyck: "Jesus Christ Our Lord in Historical Anabaptist Perspective", in Kauffman, Appraisals 44.

<sup>43</sup>See above at p51.

<sup>44</sup>George, Theology 81ff.

rather than being interpreted in the light of such commitments<sup>45</sup>. One result of this understanding was the absence of creeds among early Anabaptists: they produced several confessions but no authoritative doctrinal statements. They were not prepared to close their minds to fresh revelation through further study of the Scriptures<sup>46</sup>.

### 3) Evasion and Dilution

"A hostile distrust of traditional and contemporary theologians, theology and theologizing runs through the writings of sixteenth century Anabaptists", wrote Walter Klaassen<sup>47</sup>. Some reasons for their attitude have already been outlined - the downgrading of Scripture, the disenfranchisement of ordinary Christians, the distorting influence of doctrinal

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<sup>45</sup>Norman Kraus concluded that the Reformers failed to apply the slogan *sola scriptura* radically, in that the ecumenical creeds "remained normative for the interpretation of Scripture". But, he continued, "Anabaptist Reformers insisted that the *sola scriptura* principle must be applied more radically. The creeds can give us valuable guidance, but only Scripture has final authority for the reformulation of theological doctrine". See Kraus, C Norman: God Our Saviour (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991) 17. Note also Graham Stanton's comment: "A brief perusal of the history of the interpretation of Scripture is sufficient to confirm that the classical creeds of Christendom and particular doctrinal presuppositions have exercised a profound influence on interpretation". See Stanton, Graham N: "Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism", in Marshall, I Howard (ed): New Testament Interpretation (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1977) 62.

<sup>46</sup>Donald Durnbaugh, in his classic study of "Believers' Churches", suggested that this was a feature of many similar movements: "One quality of the Believers' Churches...is the principle of openness. By this is meant the deliberate readiness to accept new light from the Scriptures...The expectancy that further light would in fact come was a primary motivation for not adopting formal creeds. Confessions, yes, but creeds, no": Durnbaugh, Donald F: The Believers' Church (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985) 295.

<sup>47</sup>Klaassen, Neither 37.

filtering, the over-valuing of human reasoning. Another concern, already mentioned but needing further examination, was that the Reformers were unwilling to be truly radical in obeying the Bible and were using theological and intellectual trickery to evade this. This suspicion was fuelled by their awareness that Luther and Zwingli, in their early years, had argued for principles and practices on the basis of biblical teaching which they later refused to follow through as they realised the costly implications. The Reformers' subsequent attempts to justify their position biblically did not impress the Anabaptists and convinced them that theologising could all too often be used to evade and distort Scripture<sup>48</sup>.

Statements already quoted indicate this concern, speaking of the "minimizing of God's Word" (Menno), "twisting of Scripture" (Rideman), and "forcing of Scripture" (Marpeck). Anabaptists sometimes called Reformed theologians "scribes"<sup>49</sup>, using this term pejoratively in line with the criticisms made by Jesus of the scribes in New Testament times as those who prided themselves on their learning but failed to understand or obey Scripture. They were suspicious of the process of theological education and the prestige of scholarship, believing that it almost inevitably distorted the views of interpreters.

Hubmaier, who had experienced this process personally, shared this concern and accused the theologians of evading the clear teachings of Scripture in

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<sup>48</sup>Grebel, in his letter to Müntzer, one of the earliest Anabaptist documents, wrote sadly: "Around here there are not even twenty who believe the Word of God. They only believe humans - Zwingli, Leo, and others who are regarded elsewhere as learned": see Harder, Sources 293.

<sup>49</sup>See Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 71. Weninger, in 1535 in his "Vindication", called them "Pharisees": AIO 306.



order to maintain their own positions and comfort. He complained about their "tricks" and the distress they caused simple Christians with their "invented sophistic glosses and additions"<sup>50</sup>. The Anabaptists' perspective was that the theologians were either unaware of the extent to which they were adjusting their biblical interpretation to suit their own comfort and preferences, or they were deliberately avoiding the challenges of Scripture. They concluded that "these scholars seemed to twist things to suit their own needs and thereby take the 'sting' out of it"<sup>51</sup>.

The Anabaptist emphasis on the clarity of Scripture opposed the tendency among Reformed theologians to regard Scripture as ambiguous in many areas. This claim of ambiguity was used, the Anabaptists believed, as another device to evade the Bible's challenge. Art Gish wrote: "While orthodoxy implied that the Bible is ambiguous, the Anabaptists taught that it is clear in regard to both the content of Christian faith and the demands on a Christian community. They believed the biblical vision to be worth living, and they proceeded to live it"<sup>52</sup>. The Reformers agreed that Scripture was clear as to the doctrinal content of the faith, but they were unwilling to be as decisive about issues involving ecclesiology or ethics. The Anabaptists refused to distinguish between these issues, regarding this as inconsistent with the principle of *sola scriptura*. They genuinely believed that on many more issues than the Reformers admitted

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<sup>50</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 111-3. See also 376, 479.

<sup>51</sup>Yoder, Perry: "Bible Study" in Dyck, Cornelius J & Martin, Dennis D (eds) The Mennonite Encyclopedia Volume V (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990) 79. See also Harder, Sources 18; Klaassen, "Speaking" 142.

<sup>52</sup>Gish, Art: The New Left and Christian Radicalism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 55.

Scripture was easy to understand - though very costly to obey.

#### 4) Conclusion

The Anabaptists were, I believe, making significant points when they argued that Scripture was clear, simple and plain to understand. They were attempting to be faithful to the Reformers' own principle of *sola scriptura* but were convinced that the Reformers were failing to implement this fully. Their approach was somewhat iconoclastic as they sought to topple theologians past and present from their pedestals; they appeared to be rather anti-intellectual as they questioned the efficacy of education and reason in hermeneutics; and they impugned the integrity of the Reformers, whom they regarded as putting their own interests above faithful obedience to Scripture. Whether their assertions were justified will need to be considered in the light of various criticisms made of their position, but clearly their claims were substantive and presented a real challenge to the Reformers. Despite the at times naive language of the Anabaptists, these were not just the slogans of enthusiasts. Furthermore, as their opponents were forced to acknowledge, the Anabaptists lived out the implications of their approach.

#### C. Theological, Sociological and Pragmatic Factors

In the previous section it was suggested that the Anabaptists' emphasis on the clarity of Scripture developed in reaction to the inconsistencies they perceived in the Reformers' application of the *sola scriptura* principle. This was clearly one of the main factors involved, and certainly in the case of Zwingli's more radical disciples, such as Grebel and Mantz, there is documentary evidence that this was the issue on which they parted

company from their erstwhile mentor<sup>53</sup>.

But it is necessary to explore the variety of factors which together produced such a commitment to the right of ordinary Christians to interpret Scripture and such confidence that it could be understood. In the previous section, their approach appeared to be derived negatively from their misgivings about how the Reformers were handling Scripture. In this section, attention will be given to positive reasons for this approach.

### 1) Theological Factors

There was a biblical and theological basis for the Anabaptists' claim that the Bible was accessible to unsophisticated people. One passage they quoted in support of this was Jesus' prayer in Matthew 11v25, rejoicing that God had revealed truth to the simple and to children. Claesken, quoted earlier<sup>54</sup>, defended her ability to understand Scripture on the basis of this verse.

Others based their position on the fact that many of the authors of the Bible were themselves uneducated, ordinary men. Therefore, there was no reason to anticipate that what they had written was unduly complex or needed trained philosophers or theologians to unravel. Menno urged his opponent, Gellius, to be content with "the plain and simple testimony of Matthew the publican, and of Peter and John the fishermen, so that he might not deceive the unlearned by such wise reasoning, and lead them from

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<sup>53</sup>See various documents in Harder, Sources; see also the account of early Swiss Anabaptism in Blanke, Brothers.

<sup>54</sup>See above at p77. See also Vadian's comment below at p86.



the way of truth"<sup>55</sup>. He emphasised the lowly occupations of these men to make his point.

Hubmaier took this a stage further and based his commitment to simplicity on the fact that Jesus himself was a carpenter rather than a trained scholar. He told his opponents: "I grant that you are all highly educated, and in fact you are. But I have spoken in simplicity, and my speech can only be and will only be thus. For the Son of the carpenter who never went to a university has bidden me thus speak, and, in order that I may write it, has himself fashioned my pen with his carpenter's hatchet"<sup>56</sup>.

Menno Simons and Dirk Phillips based their reservations about the role of reason and intellectual approaches to Scripture on another theological argument. They recalled the effects of the Fall and emphasised that man's reason was depraved and untrustworthy as a result of this<sup>57</sup>.

The most thorough exposition of this theological basis for the Anabaptists' position appeared in Marpeck's letter to Caspar Schwenckfeld in

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<sup>55</sup>Menno, Works 708.

<sup>56</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 294-5. Walter Klaassen commented that Hubmaier "implies that he could have disputed with them using all the subtle tools of interpretation since he was also acquainted with them. But a carpenter's hatchet is not a subtle instrument. It is direct, and its action, although it may lack polish, is decisive": Klaassen: "Speaking" 139.

<sup>57</sup>See Keeney, Dutch 32. Generally the Anabaptists placed less emphasis than the Reformers on the debilitating effects of the Fall, but they seem to have felt that the effect of the Fall on human reason was especially pernicious. The Reformers also acknowledged the effect of the Fall on human reason, but the Anabaptists felt the Reformers were relying too heavily on this human ability and thus being inconsistent with what they taught about the effects of the Fall. It would, of course, have been open to the Reformers to challenge the Anabaptists for singling out human reason as especially corrupted.

1544. It is worth quoting this at some length to demonstrate how these issues had been thought through among the Anabaptists:

"God captures the wisdom of the wise in their treachery; He entrusts His truth to the faithful and truly innocent ones, but conceals it from the highly learned, wise, sly, and obstinately independent ones. He reveals it to the simple, uneducated, coarse, faithful people, who witness to the truth with poor, coarse, simple words and speech, and feel compelled to speak against such sophists. When these sophists so readily change the truth, inverting the first and the last, how disorderly it frequently becomes. Such wisdom, even today, considers Christ to be an uneducated carpenter's son, on the basis of an artful knowledge of Scripture, and with great skill, language, and reason, human wisdom itself composed such a lofty Christ...Just as God has always begun so will God conclude: with the faithful and simple people...Therefore, to learn the language of the simple, faithful, truly believing hearts is now...a thousand times more necessary than to learn Latin, Greek, Hebrew, or other languages"<sup>58</sup>.

Marpeck raised the same concerns, about perversion of truth resulting from over-emphasising learning, and about the motivation of scholars (here referred to as "sophists" rather than "scribes"), but here they are set in a theological perspective, reflecting on God's dealings with people throughout history.

## 2) Sociological and Pragmatic Factors.

It is surely no coincidence that the Anabaptist movement in which the right and ability of simple people to understand Scripture was stressed consisted largely of uneducated peasants and craftsmen<sup>59</sup>. Although many early leaders had received some form of education - and some had been

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<sup>58</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 370.

<sup>59</sup>See Clasen, Claus-Peter: Anabaptism - A Social History 1525-1618 (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1972) for extensive evidence of this.

through university or had been theologically trained - most of these died young, leaving young congregations almost devoid of trained scholars or theologians. It has certainly been argued, both by their contemporaries and by later scholars, that the Anabaptist position was a counsel of necessity<sup>60</sup>.

Vadian, who was related to Conrad Grebel and knew the Anabaptists well, suggested that "because they were of the common people, not much practised in the Scripture, they tried to reject this [the need for theological guidance] and defend the practice by always quoting at the beginning of the sermon the verse in Matthew 11: 'I thank thee, father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes'"<sup>61</sup>.

The accusation that the Anabaptists had adopted their radical stance on the clarity of Scripture and the ability of ordinary Christians to interpret it because they had no alternative was frequently levelled against them. Their writings record various labels which were applied to them - "inexpert"<sup>62</sup>, "unlearned"<sup>63</sup>, "ignorant"<sup>64</sup>, "simple"<sup>65</sup>, "coarse"<sup>66</sup>. They were charged with inventing theological justifications for positions which were forced upon them because of the composition of their churches.

The interaction between theological and pragmatic factors is not easy to assess. Modern emphases on theology as reflection on praxis warn against

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<sup>60</sup>EBI 17.

<sup>61</sup>Harder, Sources 381.

<sup>62</sup>Menno, Works 214.

<sup>63</sup>Menno, Works 214.

<sup>64</sup>Menno, Works 242.

<sup>65</sup>MM 612.

<sup>66</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 370.



artificial attempts to separate these factors or even to prioritise them. That a theological undergirding of their position arose out of the Anabaptists' pastoral experience and ecclesiological practice need not be seen as invalidating that undergirding. It could equally be argued that the Reformers' position was derived not from theological concerns but from the fact that the Reformation began in the universities and targeted those with power and influence in Church and State.

A significant factor in the development of Anabaptist thinking on this issue was their experience of the Reformers' handling of Scripture. The Anabaptists were disappointed, impatient and at times outraged by the Reformers' unwillingness to teach and practise what they believed was crystal clear. As they reacted against these seeming compromises and reflected on the reasons for them, their position on the clarity and accessibility of Scripture developed. As biblical people, they sought guidance from Scripture and discovered there significant themes concerning God's concern for the poor and the simple<sup>67</sup>.

The significance of the absence of scholars among the Anabaptists should not be unduly stressed<sup>68</sup>. Undoubtedly this was a factor in the adoption of a hermeneutical model that did not depend on the availability of trained theologians, and in the development of suspicion of all scholarship. But there is reason to conclude that, even if there had been many trained

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<sup>67</sup>EBI 29.

<sup>68</sup>Some Mennonite scholars, concerned to encourage scholarship among their own people, have accepted this argument too easily and may be failing to appreciate the theological reasons for the stance of their forebears, which still present a challenge even when the scholar's role is rightly given greater honour.

theologians in their ranks, they would still have adopted a similar position. The attitude of Hubmaier, the most highly trained theologian among the Anabaptists, testifies to this. Hubmaier was acknowledged by his opponents as a competent theologian. His writings were proscribed by Catholic authorities alongside those of Luther and Calvin. But Hubmaier was committed to the principle of simplicity and was highly suspicious of the effects of theological training, as quotations from his writings have shown. Among Anabaptists theological and intellectual sophistication was suspect, not just because they lacked theologians, but because they did not like what they saw of the fruit of such sophistication.

## D. Criticisms, Qualifications and Evaluation.

### 1) Criticisms

Two criticisms have already been considered - that this position resulted from necessity rather than choice, and that it demonstrates naive over-confidence rather than substantive methodology<sup>1</sup>. A further criticism, that Anabaptism was anti-intellectual, devaluing the role of reason, learning and the intellect, is hardly unexpected given their statements about reason and education. Willem Balke commented that Calvin "repeatedly and strongly opposed the Anabaptists' tendency towards anti-intellectualism"<sup>2</sup>, and Balke himself concluded that the Anabaptists "spiritualistically undervalued the culture and scholarship of their day"<sup>3</sup>.

That the Anabaptists undervalued culture and scholarship seems clear, but Balke's explanation that this resulted from their spiritualistic emphases is true, if at all, only of certain sections of the movement. Among other groups, confidence in a common sense approach, rather than any reliance on spiritual illumination, caused them to ignore scholarship. And throughout Anabaptism, anti-intellectualism was strengthened by the concern to avoid what was regarded as the polluting influence of human rationalising<sup>4</sup>.

Another criticism is that, in their concern to prevent biblical commands

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<sup>1</sup>That a degree of naivete was present among the Anabaptists is not disputed by even their most ardent defenders. What is disputed is that this explains their commitment to the clarity and accessibility of Scripture.

<sup>2</sup>Balke, Calvin 237.

<sup>3</sup>Balke, Calvin 207.

<sup>4</sup>Davis: "Anabaptism and Ascetic Holiness", in Stayer & Packull, Anabaptists 59.



being obscured by undue sophistication, Anabaptists failed to appreciate that there are real difficulties in the text, difficulties which will not be resolved without research into linguistics, history, ancient culture and other issues where scholarship is necessary<sup>5</sup>. John Yoder recognised that "critics of the Anabaptists would argue for the necessity of more complicated analysis of a biblical text in order to avoid taking it at its most simple meaning"<sup>6</sup>. It does seem that Anabaptism discarded scholarship so completely as to deprive it of tools that could have been used to elucidate rather than to evade Scripture. Their relative ignorance of ancient history, for example, meant that sometimes they took texts at face value rather than discovering the meaning that the authors intended. Their commitment to the interpretive enfranchisement of all believers brought them perilously close to the indefensible position that all believers can interpret Scripture equally well.

It is also arguable that the Anabaptists' insistence on the accessibility of the "plain sense" of Scripture is defensible only within the very Christendom they so vehemently opposed. In cultures that have not been "Christianised" over centuries, some would argue that the gap between the contemporary situation and Scripture is so great that attempts to understand Scripture without contextual assistance are liable to produce confusion and misunderstanding. Since the Anabaptists were unaware of such cultural diversity, this criticism should be directed at the contemporary

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<sup>5</sup>However, Anabaptists did not regard Scripture as uniformly clear and simple to understand. They acknowledged that there were unclear and difficult passages. Hubmaier, for example, recognised that there were "difficult passages" as well as "sunny, luminous words": see Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 99.

<sup>6</sup>EBI 16.

relevance of their hermeneutic rather than at its sixteenth century validity<sup>7</sup>. Even there, however, it is arguable that a genuine first-generation reading of Scripture may unlock more of its true meaning than a critical scholarly reading within Christendom<sup>8</sup>.

A further criticism that could be made is that, although they refused to allow doctrinal implications to cloud their understanding of Scripture, the Anabaptists allowed ethical considerations to do this. If the Reformers were determined to interpret Scripture in a way that was consistent with their doctrinal convictions, perhaps the Anabaptists were equally determined to interpret Scripture in a way that was consistent with their ethical convictions. Their likely response to this criticism - that their ethical convictions were derived from Scripture, not imposed on it - would then parallel the Reformers' claims that their doctrinal commitments were also derived from the Bible<sup>9</sup>.

A final weakness, which became increasingly apparent as the movement spread, was the difficulty of resolving disputes about the meaning of passages of Scripture. This difficulty affects apparently more sophisticated approaches also - indeed, the number of possible meanings may be multiplied - but it does appear as a particularly acute problem for those who claim that Scripture is plain and clear. William Keeney noted:

"Because they did not carefully examine their assumptions on Scriptural interpretation, they at times failed to understand each other and often

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<sup>7</sup>See below at p333. The Reformers were, of course, equally unaware of cultures beyond Christendom and their exegesis likewise reflected this limitation.

<sup>8</sup>This issue will be explored below at pp333-4.

<sup>9</sup>This will be explored further at pp259ff.

lacked sympathetic appreciation for any interpretation other than the one which they proposed. The fragmentation into smaller and intolerant groups in the second generation was partially a consequence of this weakness"<sup>10</sup>. This weakness was partially offset by the Anabaptists' openness to fresh revelation, but evidently the meaning of Scripture was not as clear as it first seemed.

## 2) Qualifications

The above criticisms must be taken into account in any attempt to evaluate the Anabaptists' position, but it is also important to note certain qualifications which they themselves placed on their basic principles. Some of these may have been worked out in response to criticisms, but others seem to have been in place from an early stage. By comparison with the number of statements in which those basic principles are set out, these qualifications are not given much space, but they do show that some thought had been given to how the principles were applied in practice.

First, the Anabaptists cautiously accepted that reason had a place in interpretation. This has already been noted, together with the distinction between reason as rationality or common sense - with which they were comfortable - and reason as human philosophy and rationalising - of which they were suspicious. While Marpeck rejected his opponents' use of "high-minded reason, cunning and arbitrary fabrications"<sup>11</sup>, he advised them not to abandon reason, but, quoting from the Epistle to the Ephesians about human reason being "darkened", to submit to Christ so that their reason

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<sup>10</sup>Keeney, Dutch 194.

<sup>11</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 71.



might be set free to function properly<sup>12</sup>. Similarly, Hubmaier, while not appealing as Luther did to "manifest reason", clearly relied on reason in practice to validate his understanding of Scripture. Walter Klaassen concluded that this was true of all the Swiss Brethren and was based on their understanding that the Spirit's work was to liberate reason from darkness to light<sup>13</sup>.

Second, some Anabaptists recognised that knowledge of languages was helpful, primarily as an aid to interpreting difficult texts. Hubmaier wrote: "Although I do not despise the use of the languages for the exposition of difficult passages of Scripture, for the sunny, luminous words one needs neither tongue nor lung"<sup>14</sup>. Marpeck, too, concluded that "these gifts, be they languages or other natural skills, are commendable"<sup>15</sup>, but he insisted that learning the language of simple hearts was more necessary than proficiency in ancient languages. Others, though, were less enthusiastic about the value of knowing Hebrew and Greek. David Joris asserted that the Holy Spirit and the Dutch language were sufficient<sup>16</sup>. And Zwingli complained about the Swiss Brethren's lack of interest in the original languages of Scripture<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 72.

<sup>13</sup>Klaassen, "Speaking" 144-5.

<sup>14</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 99.

<sup>15</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 370.

<sup>16</sup>Waite, Gary K: David Joris (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1990) 92.

<sup>17</sup>Pipkin, H Wayne: Huldrych Zwingli Writings Vol II (Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1984) 173.

Understandably, Anabaptists found it easier to accept the value of knowing ancient languages in interpretation than other aspects of scholarship, for studying the original text of Scripture did not detract from their commitment to the adequacy of Scripture to interpret itself. It simply drew them back to Scripture. But they remained wary that reliance on linguistic or any other intellectual skills might result in the imposition of alien concepts on Scripture. Menno expressed the caution felt by many: "Even as the Bible or the Scriptures are read by the greater part of the world with impure, carnal hearts, so also can they undoubtedly be translated with a carnal heart without regeneration from one language to another, through knowledge and skill in languages"<sup>18</sup>.

Third, despite their reservations, the Anabaptists made some use of philosophy and theology to explicate Scripture. William Keeney concluded about Dirk Phillips and Menno Simons that "while they tried to use the Bible as the foundation and norm for their theology, they at times used philosophical and theological aids to develop their position where the Bible is only implicit and not explicit"<sup>19</sup>. Both men probably failed to appreciate what they owed to the theological training they had received as monk and priest, and made more use than they realised of theology<sup>20</sup>.

Fourth, the confidence that ordinary people could interpret the Bible must be understood in the light of other important Anabaptist convictions concerning the role of the congregation and the work of the Holy Spirit. The interpretation of Scripture was within the competence of every

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<sup>18</sup>Menno, Works 653.

<sup>19</sup>Keeney, Dutch 191.

<sup>20</sup>Keeney, Dutch 197.

believer, but the locus for such interpretation was the community of believers and reliance on the Holy Spirit as the interpreter of the Bible was essential. Individuals were not to rely on their own understandings, nor to discount the contributions of brothers and sisters. The ideal Anabaptist interpreter was a Spirit-led believer-in-community.

### 3) Evaluations

Any assessment of the principles outlined above must remain tentative until they are placed in the context of other important aspects of Anabaptist hermeneutics, but three comments may be made here.

First, the Anabaptist approach was truly distinctive. It was not just a simplistic application of the Reformers' ideas but a more radical position, which had significant consequences. It had weaknesses as well as strengths, but it did challenge prevailing hermeneutical assumptions and demonstrate areas of inconsistency.

Second, for thousands of ordinary Christians, this approach was genuinely liberating. Whatever its shortcomings and imbalances, it enfranchised lay men and women in a way that the Reformation had promised but had failed to deliver. The faith and energy that resulted from ordinary Christians grappling with Scripture help to explain the movement's vitality despite severe persecution. LaVerne Rutschman wrote that they were "liberated through the study of the Bible that led them to reject the alienating social, political and ecclesiastical structures of their period. They found courage to deny church and state to the point of martyrdom because of their conviction that God was speaking to them in a new way through his



word"<sup>21</sup>. It was not only the content of the word that was so exhilarating but the new and liberating hermeneutic that empowered ordinary believers to study and respond to the word.

Third, this approach by itself is inadequate. In particular, disparaging scholarship and failing to acknowledge difficulties in Scripture<sup>22</sup> may mean that the enfranchisement of lay people is at the expense of accurate and trustworthy interpretation. What many readers assume to be the "plain sense" of Scripture may bear little resemblance to the meaning intended by the original author in a different historical and cultural setting. Some of the Anabaptists recognised this inadequacy, welcomed contributions from scholars, and insisted that other hermeneutical principles also be used to ensure proper interpretation.

#### E. Interpreting Scripture by Scripture.

The Anabaptists' reticence to use external aids to help them interpret the Bible was balanced by expectant faith that there were sufficient resources within Scripture to solve problems that arose. Marpeck wrote: "We know that the more thoroughly the Holy Scriptures are interpreted the more clearly the meaning will agree with it, for the Holy Scriptures cannot contradict each other as long as they are correctly compared and interpreted"<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup>Rutschman: "Anabaptism and Liberation Theology", in Schipani, Freedom 60.

<sup>22</sup>The Reformers, however, have been criticised for the same failure, which seems to have been a feature of pre-critical sixteenth century hermeneutics in general. See Ferguson, Biblical 28-9.

<sup>23</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 565.

The Anabaptists expected to understand obscure passages in the light of clear ones, by comparing Scripture with Scripture<sup>24</sup>. Hubmaier wrote:

"Where certain sayings of Scripture are dark, or presented in very short form, from which disagreements may follow, one ought, in order to resolve any difficulty, place other writings that are clearer and plainer, but related to the same matter, beside the short, dark sayings, as many candles lit together. Thus the bright, clear light of the Scriptures will break forth"<sup>25</sup>. For Hubmaier, the clarity of Scripture was not compromised by the existence of difficult passages. Provided there were within Scripture clear passages that shed light on these awkward sections, the overall clarity of Scripture was guaranteed<sup>26</sup>.

One of Hubmaier's concerns was that texts taken in isolation were often "half-truths". He urged interpreters to refrain from "doing patchwork with the Scriptures" and to practise instead "comparing opposing Scriptures and uniting both into a whole judgment". He believed that failure to do this produced "sects, quarrels and heresies"<sup>27</sup>. Denck, too, advised against disparaging any part of Scripture and urged careful comparison and balance. He wrote: "Should there be a portion which he cannot understand

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<sup>24</sup>This was an Augustinian principle, one of relatively few that the Anabaptists adopted from this church father. See Augsburg, Myron S: Principles of Biblical Interpretation (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1967) 20.

<sup>25</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 322.

<sup>26</sup>Among Anabaptist leaders, Hubmaier appears to have given the greatest attention to this issue. In his works he explained how to interpret obscure passages in the light of clearer ones. See, in addition to passages quoted in this section, Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 53, 104-5, 109.

<sup>27</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 428.

within the context, he need not despise the witness of any part of Scripture. Rather, he seeks in all diligence, holding one over against the other"<sup>28</sup>.

Hubmaier also taught another rule to be applied by those intent on allowing Scripture to interpret itself - the importance of reading texts in their context. He wrote: "The Bible also interprets itself in that any passage must be viewed in the context of what precedes and what follows. The crucial passage, if torn out of context, will admit to all kinds of interpretations, but if placed in the light of the context will be quite clear and plain"<sup>29</sup>. How consistently the Anabaptists applied this principle is open to debate<sup>30</sup>. They sometimes quoted proof-texts with little indication that they had considered the context in which these texts appeared, and Calvin was among those who criticised them for wrenching texts out of their contexts<sup>31</sup>; but they seem to have recognised that the clarity of Scripture did not require that every verse could be understood in isolation.

Menno, too, affirmed the importance of context for the correct understanding of Scripture. He protested against proof-texting: "It is the nature of all heresies to tear a fragment from the holy Scriptures and thereby to defend their adopted worship. They did not regard that which is written before or after, by which one may ascertain the right meaning"<sup>32</sup>. And

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<sup>28</sup>Furcha & Battles, Denck 67.

<sup>29</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 428.

<sup>30</sup>Holland criticised Rideman for failing to observe the contexts of verses he quoted. See Holland, Hermeneutics 43-4, 129.

<sup>31</sup>Balke, Calvin 314.

<sup>32</sup>Menno, Works 268.



Marpeck admonished Schwenckfeld: "I must also respond to your futile talk about this entire second chapter to the Colossians. Read it diligently, and do not rip out such fictitious fragments"<sup>33</sup>.

Dirk Phillips taught not only that individual verses needed to be understood in the light of their immediate context, but that whole passages needed to be set in the context of Scripture as a whole. He wrote: "It is neither right nor permissible (as some learned men say it is) that many passages of Scripture must make way for one single passage, and be broken, distorted and altered because of one passage, but one passage should give way to many and be understood according to many proofs"<sup>34</sup>.

The Reformers shared this commitment to interpreting Scripture by Scripture. Although they gave more weight than the Anabaptists to external aids to interpretation, their primary method was also to compare Scripture with Scripture. Alister McGrath described the hermeneutics of Zwingli and Bucer as "an attempt to return *ad fontes*, to interpret Scripture in terms of its own parameters, rather than in terms of an imposed hermeneutical framework - *scriptura sui ipsius interpres*"<sup>35</sup>. As with the commitment to *sola scriptura* and the "plain sense" of Scripture, then, so with *scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, there was little theoretical difference between the Reformers and the Anabaptists. But both accused their opponents of failing

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<sup>33</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 383. Accusations of proof-texting were exchanged among all sides in sixteenth century debates: they were not just made against Anabaptists.

<sup>34</sup>Phillips, Dirk: Enchiridion (Aylmer, Ontario: Pathway, 1966) 108.

<sup>35</sup>McGrath, Intellectual 172. On Luther, see Wood, Interpretation 89. On Bullinger, see Carter, Reformers 61.

to apply this principle correctly, of emphasising certain texts to the exclusion of others. And there were several differences in the way in which this principle was understood and applied.

First, the Anabaptists insisted that the Old Testament be interpreted in the light of the New<sup>36</sup>, and specifically in the light of the teachings and example of Jesus. They regarded Jesus as the supreme revelation of God, through whom the light of revelation shone most powerfully. Thus, the passages containing his actions and sayings were equated with Hubmaier's "sunny, luminous passages" and were used as a plumbline to interpret everything else<sup>37</sup>. The Reformers were more inclined to view the Bible as a "flat" book and to concentrate on the more immediate context, or to interpret all texts in the light of certain doctrines regarded as central to the whole of Scripture. Indeed, rather than interpreting other texts in relation to the example and teachings of Jesus, some of the "hard sayings" of Jesus were interpreted (the Anabaptists would say "explained away") in the light of other passages which were held to be clearer.

This was a major point of dispute between the Reformers and the Anabaptists and led to considerable divergence in ethical and ecclesiological

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<sup>36</sup>Myron Augsburger wrote that "the Augustinian principle, accepted by the Anabaptist Hubmaier, that 'the more obscure passages are to be interpreted by the more clear' was applied to the concept of progressive revelation" - in a way that neither Augustine nor the Reformers had done: Augsburger, Principles 20.

<sup>37</sup>Menno, for example, urged that "the context of a passage and Christ's total teachings" should be considered to reach a satisfactory interpretation: see EBI 74.

conclusions. It will be explored in detail in later sections<sup>38</sup>. It indicates a difficulty inherent in the principle of interpreting Scripture by Scripture, namely how one decides which passages are clear and which obscure. Anabaptists regarded as clear various passages the Reformers regarded as ambiguous. The Reformers accused them of overconfidence. The Anabaptists retorted that the Reformers were not prepared for the radical obedience involved in obeying these passages.

Second, the Anabaptists were wary of the Reformers' use of the "general drift" of Scripture. They acknowledged the validity of this in principle and left room for what they called "the character of Scripture"<sup>39</sup>, but they suspected once again that this could be used to evade rather than to explain Scripture.

A good example is Sattler's debate with Bucer and Capito, the Strasbourg Reformers. He rejected their use of the concept of "love" in interpreting Paul's teaching because he felt they were using this to disregard specific instructions and were reducing Scripture to vague generalities that deprived it of force and challenge. Sattler listed twenty reasons for rejecting this practice, and argued that application of the principle of love "renders unnecessary any serious attempt to imitate Jesus, enables believers to resemble unbelievers, and eliminates a direct appeal to an

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<sup>38</sup>See below at pp143ff.

<sup>39</sup>EBI 17.



Considering the similar principle advocated by Bullinger in his letter of 1531 entitled "How to deal with Anabaptists", John Yoder commented: "Here it is transparent how the concept of "love" has become equivalent to "whatever serves the preservation of the unity of society", with "faith" meaning all the dogmatic deposit of the church's experiences. Thus the "rule of faith and love" as hermeneutic guide could mean the radical relativisation of *sola scriptura*"<sup>41</sup>. It is very difficult to imagine the Reformers accepting such an argument from their Catholic opponents as they themselves used against Anabaptists. Again, the Anabaptists were pursuing a Reformation principle to its logical conclusion, to the discomfort of the Reformers themselves.

The same point arose at the Bern Debate of 1532. The Reformers proposed that "Love to God and the neighbour [instead of the written Word of God] is to be the basis for adjusting all differences in this debate." The

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<sup>40</sup>Weaver, "Discipleship" 257-8. See also Horsch, Mennonites 72; and Deppermann, Hoffman 182-3. Deppermann noted that Denck disagreed with Sattler on this issue and sided with the Reformers (see 188). This, together with the warmer relationship between Sattler and Bucer and Capito than between these Reformers and Denck, indicates the complex nature of the situation in Strasbourg, and the difficulty of drawing definite lines between the various groups.

<sup>41</sup>EBI 17. See also on Bullinger, RR 593. Similar statements by Zwingli ("Even if the Anabaptists had the Scripture to support their views, these things should be decided by love"), Oecolampadius ("It seems to me the Anabaptists leave love out of consideration, which shows us what is to be observed of external things") and Capito ("for love's sake infant baptism, although admittedly unscriptural, should be practised to maintain ecclesiastical unity") demonstrate how widespread this principle was in the Reformation: see Horsch, Mennonites 353.

Anabaptists accepted this, provided "love" was not interpreted to mean setting aside clear scriptural commands. Their concern was that, however high-sounding such words as "love" and "faith" were, they were used, wittingly or unwittingly, to justify action or inaction that was contrary to the intention of Scripture<sup>42</sup>. The supposed context or general drift was supplanting the actual text of Scripture.

The Anabaptist contribution to the development of the *scriptura sui ipsius* *interpretes* principle, then, was to require a careful re-examination of the way the Reformers were using it. If they erred on the side of undervaluing context and the general drift of Scripture, their challenge at least acted as a check on the Reformers' paying too little attention to details that did not fit easily into their systems and preferences.

Despite the criticisms that can be levelled against the Anabaptists, their commitment to the clarity of Scripture, their understanding of how *scriptura sui ipsius interpretes* should be applied, and their confidence that ordinary Christians could understand Scripture,<sup>43</sup> constitute an attractive and challenging legacy.

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<sup>42</sup>Denck wrote: "He who honours Scripture but lacks divine love must take heed not to turn Scripture into an idol as do all scribes who are not "learned" for the kingdom of God". See Furcha & Battles, Denck 63. Although Denck stressed love more than many Anabaptists, this comment would not have been unacceptable to any of them. But for Anabaptists, Denck included, love and obedience to the texts of Scripture were not set in opposition.

### A. Introduction

The previous section noted the Anabaptists' wariness of reliance on the supposed "general drift" of Scripture that excused readers from facing the challenge of Jesus' teaching and lifestyle<sup>1</sup>. The confidence that Scripture was clear and that all Christians could interpret it applied above all to those passages which contained the words and actions of Jesus.

In this section, the Christocentrism of the Anabaptists' approach to hermeneutics will be explored. The origins of this distinctive feature will be sought, a comparison made with the Reformers' approach, and consideration given to the relationship between the Anabaptists' Christocentric hermeneutic and other aspects of their theology.

### B. Christocentric Hermeneutics in Anabaptist Writings

Scholars generally agree about the Christocentric nature of Anabaptist hermeneutics, distinguishing this from other sixteenth century approaches to Scripture. Walter Klaassen referred to their "interpretive principle of 'the doctrine of Christ and the apostles'. Anything that agreed with this principle was also the Word of God for the present; anything that disagreed was not"<sup>2</sup>. Franklin Littell concurred that "we have then the person and work of Jesus Christ pivotal in all understanding of Holy

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<sup>1</sup>See above at pp101-2.

<sup>2</sup>AIO 140. Here and subsequently 'the apostles' are mentioned as well as Jesus. The implications of this for Christocentrism will be explored below at pp123-4.



Scripture"<sup>3</sup>. And William Estep embraced most of early Anabaptism in his statement that "Marpeck's interpretation of the Bible, like that of the Swiss Brethren, the Hutterites and the Mennonites, was Christocentric"<sup>4</sup>. He concluded: "Christ was the key to a biblical hermeneutic"<sup>5</sup>. On this issue there appears to have been as great a uniformity among the various Anabaptist groups as there is agreement among later scholars about the pervasiveness of this principle<sup>6</sup>.

A selection of quotations from Anabaptist writings will suffice to illustrate their widespread commitment to Christocentrism in hermeneutics. Schiemer wrote: "You must know that God spoke to the Jews through Moses and the prophets in a hidden manner. But when Christ himself came, he and his apostles illuminated all things with a much clearer understanding"<sup>7</sup>. The belief that Jesus clarified what had previously been obscure appears frequently in Anabaptist writings. This conviction led them to regard the words of Jesus as the "sunny" and "clear" passages of which Hubmaier spoke so confidently<sup>8</sup>, and as the basis from which to interpret other passages. The Reformers, however, often seem to have struggled with the words of

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<sup>3</sup>Littell, Tribute 21.

<sup>4</sup>Estep, Anabaptist 142.

<sup>5</sup>Estep, William: "The Ecumenical Implications of Menno Simons' View of the Church" (MQR LXII) 358.

<sup>6</sup>Alvin Beachey noted the tension within Anabaptism between those who regarded the Bible as a book with divine revelation and those who saw it as a witness to revelation (an issue to be explored below under the section on "Spirit and Word"), but he concluded that both groups had in practice a Christocentric view of Scripture. See Beachey, Alvin: "The Theology and Practice of Anabaptist Worship" (MQR XL) 163.

<sup>7</sup>AIO 147.

<sup>8</sup>Klaassen, "Speaking" 147.

Jesus and to have used other passages to clarify their meaning<sup>9</sup>.

Pfistermeyer developed further the theme of Christ as the one who explains and clarifies Scripture: "What Christ has explained and helped us to understand, I will adhere to, since it is the will of his heavenly Father. I accept the Old Testament wherever it points to Christ. However, Christ came with a more exalted and perfect teaching"<sup>10</sup>. Christocentrism, for Pfistermeyer, seemed to mean two things: that the words of Christ took precedence over all other words in Scripture; and that Christ was the interpreter of the Old Testament.

Sattler's normative principle for biblical interpretation was "the perfection of Christ", by which he meant both the words and example of Christ<sup>11</sup>. At his trial, Sattler retorted, "I am not aware that we have acted contrary to the Gospel and the Word of God; I appeal to the words of Christ"<sup>12</sup>. It was by the words of Christ that he wanted to be judged as to his faithfulness to the whole of Scripture.

Menno used the classic Anabaptist phrase in his "Why I do not Cease Teaching and Writing" in 1539: "No doctrine is profitable or serviceable to our salvation but the doctrine of Christ Jesus and His holy apostles". He urged that both Testaments should be "rightly explained according to

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<sup>9</sup>As, for example, on the issue of swearing oaths. To the Anabaptists, Jesus' words in Matthew 5 were plain and forbade all oath-taking, whatever other passages might indicate. But the Reformers interpreted Jesus' words in the light of other texts where oath-taking seemed to be legitimate. On the oath, see further below at pp302ff.

<sup>10</sup>AIO 149.

<sup>11</sup>Snyder, Sattler 119.

<sup>12</sup>MM 417.

the intent of Jesus Christ and His holy apostles"<sup>13</sup>. In his major work, "Foundation of Christian Doctrine", Menno expounded this further. The "intent of Jesus Christ" meant the "Spirit, Word, counsel, admonition, and usage of Christ. What these allow we are free to do, but what He forbids we are not free to do. To this all true Christians should conform, and not to doubtful histories and obscure passages from which we can draw nothing certain and which teach the very opposite of what the Lord's apostles publicly taught"<sup>14</sup>.

Menno, like Hubmaier, was confident that the words and example of Jesus were clear and straightforward by comparison with other parts of Scripture. Indeed, he risked consigning some texts to the scrapheap because he regarded them as contradicting what Christ taught<sup>15</sup>. In his "Reply to Gellius Faber", he gave another list of what Christocentrism meant: "All the Scriptures point us to the Spirit, Gospel, example, ordinance and usage of Christ"<sup>16</sup>. He then added that he followed "Christ's plain Word and command, the doctrine and usage of the holy apostles in the first, unfalsified church"<sup>17</sup>. Here the link between Christocentrism and the Anabaptist commitment to the clarity and simplicity of Scripture becomes explicit.

Dirk Phillips wrote in his "Enchiridion" that "the only touchstone and the only measuring rod is God's word, and the only foundation is Jesus Christ"<sup>18</sup>, and that the whole of the Old Testament "points to Jesus

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<sup>13</sup>Menno, Works 312.

<sup>14</sup>Menno, Works 186.

<sup>15</sup>This danger will be explored below at pp165ff.

<sup>16</sup>Menno, Works 173.

<sup>17</sup>Menno, Works 173.

<sup>18</sup>Phillips, Enchiridion 473.



Christ"<sup>19</sup>. He concluded: "Jesus with his doctrine, life and example is our Teacher, Leader and Guide, him we must hear and follow"<sup>20</sup>.

Rideman's writings demonstrate that the Hutterites shared this Christocentric approach. Comparing the Old and New Testaments, he concluded: "the light of divine truth hath appeared more brightly in Christ, who hath revealed to us the real will of the Father...the law was given by Moses, but truth came by Christ"<sup>21</sup>. He seems to have been suggesting that what God really wants from his people can only be found by listening to Jesus, rather than hunting through the "shadows" <sup>22</sup> of the Old Testament.

Among lesser-known Anabaptists the same focus on Christ is evident. In a letter to his wife in 1559, the imprisoned Jelis Bernaerts wrote: "Now we have a better testament, which is for ever, and not as Israel, a law written in tables of stone, but written in the tables of our hearts...For if we now have a new testament given by Christ, who is our Leader and Lawgiver, we must keep His commandments, follow Him...and show forth His image"<sup>23</sup>.

The one major exception to this Christocentric hermeneutic was found among the Münsterites. There the Christocentric approach was replaced by a focus on the Old Testament and a tendency to make Old Testament practices

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<sup>19</sup>Phillips, Enchiridion 56. Compare Menno's statement that "All the Scriptures, both the Old and the New Testaments, on every hand, point us to Christ Jesus that we are to follow him": Menno, Works 749.

<sup>20</sup>Phillips, Enchiridion 486.

<sup>21</sup>Rideman, Confession 196 (italics mine).

<sup>22</sup>This word is used of the Old Testament in Rideman, Confession 195.

<sup>23</sup>MM 625.

normative in a way that by-passed Jesus and the New Testament<sup>24</sup>. This attempt had disastrous consequences, both for the Münsterites who were massacred, and for the whole Anabaptist movement which was regarded as equally dangerous. This incident reinforced the determination of Menno and other leaders to be thoroughly Christocentric in their hermeneutics.

This selection of Anabaptist statements on Christocentrism seems to support the consensus among scholars that it was a key feature of their hermeneutics, and that it was shared by all the main Anabaptist groups. However, these quotations have also indicated that Christocentrism meant different things among Anabaptists. An analysis of these implications of Christocentrism is needed in order to assess its substantive contribution to issues of interpretation.

### C. The Implications of Christocentric Hermeneutics in Anabaptism

First, Christocentrism meant to the Anabaptists that the Bible was not flat. Some passages had greater authority for their doctrines and practices than others. In general, the New Testament took precedence over the Old<sup>25</sup>, and specifically the life and teachings of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels, were regarded as the pinnacle of God's revelation and therefore primary in all questions of interpretation. Denny Weaver recognised that "the assumption of the normative value of the teaching and example of Jesus and also of the early church gave a priority to the New Testament, and particularly to the narratives about Jesus. Anabaptists

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<sup>24</sup>Krahn, Dutch 140.

<sup>25</sup>Although this is an oversimplification of the Anabaptist position on the relation between the Testaments. See below at pp150ff.

thus developed a kind of canon within the canon, and they read the Bible not as a flat series of propositions and timeless allegories, but with a sense of direction and development from Old Testament to New Testament"<sup>26</sup>.

The development of a 'canon within the canon' may seem to threaten the authority of other parts of Scripture, as the Anabaptists' opponents were quick to point out<sup>27</sup>, but the Anabaptists do not seem to have intended this. Walter Klaassen commented that Anabaptist interpreters "established levels of authority in the Bible; they did not take a uniform view of it as though all parts were of uniform significance"<sup>28</sup>. The phrase "uniform significance" is helpful. Anabaptists did not challenge the inspiration and authority of the Bible; indeed, they often affirmed their commitment to the entire Scripture as the Word of God<sup>29</sup>. But some passages were seen as less significant for the purposes of Christian discipleship. These passages remained true and trustworthy, but their application to the present day was seen as limited (or even non-existent)<sup>30</sup>. Significance was measured primarily from an ecclesiocentric perspective<sup>31</sup>.

Anabaptists began with Jesus' teaching and example on issues and interpreted other relevant passages in the light of this and in a way that did not conflict with it. Many of their disagreements with the Reformers resulted

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<sup>26</sup>Weaver, Becoming 118.

<sup>27</sup>On Calvin, see Farley, Calvin 30; on Bucer and Bullinger: Steinmetz, Reformers 220ff; on Schwenckfeld: EBI 93.

<sup>28</sup>Klaassen, Neither 45. See also EBI 110.

<sup>29</sup>See, for example, Menno, Works 159; Grebel, in Harder, Sources 286-7.

<sup>30</sup>Beachey, Grace 146-9.

<sup>31</sup>See below at p235.



from this hermeneutical procedure. Henry Poettcker noted that Menno "drew inspiration and challenge" from Old Testament characters and taught that "their examples of trust were to be followed"; but, unlike the Reformers, who based ethical conclusions on the Old Testament, Menno was convinced that "their conduct was to be measured against the standard of Christ"<sup>32</sup>. On various issues from war and wealth to the nature of the church and the kingdom of God, the Anabaptists who started with Jesus reached radically different conclusions from the Reformers who did not start with Jesus in the same way<sup>33</sup>.

Second, Christocentrism meant that the whole of Scripture was seen as pointing to Jesus. The Old Testament prepared the way for him and pointed forward to him as the fulfilment of all the promises of God. This was the understanding of participants in the Bern Colloquy, whose agreed statement on the Old Testament described it as "an announcement, witness, type or sign of Christ" and concluded it was "valid insofar as it illuminates and reveals Christ"<sup>34</sup>. The New Testament pointed back to him as the founder and head of the church, as its source of life and power, and as the example to be followed in everything. William Keeney noted that Menno and Dirk not only regarded the New Testament as superior to the Old in its

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<sup>32</sup>EBI 70. See also: Reardon, Bernard: Religious Thought in the Reformation (London: Longman, 1981) 222.

<sup>33</sup>See, for example, on the hermeneutical basis of the debate about baptism: Estep, Anabaptist 154, 174.

<sup>34</sup>AIO 150. See also Marpeck's comment that "all the patriarchs, law, and prophets pointed to Himself" and that Scripture was written by the Holy Spirit "for" Jesus, as a witness or gift to him: Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 438; and Phillips, Enchiridion 56.

application to believers, but also operated with a hierarchy within the New Testament, ranking the Gospels above the remainder because these contained the words and example of Jesus<sup>35</sup>.

Therefore, since every text in some way pointed to Christ, not only was the whole of Scripture to be interpreted by comparing it with what Jesus said and did, but it was assumed that in every passage something could be learned which would increase the interpreter's understanding of Jesus and assist in discipleship. According to the Bern Colloquy, such passages, when understood as pointing to Jesus, are "useful for the faithful in strengthening their faith"<sup>36</sup>.

Third, Christocentrism was a deliberate policy to ensure that Jesus was recognised and honoured both as the unique Son of God and as the authoritative interpreter. Not only was he himself the pre-eminent revelation of God, but he unlocked the secrets of Scripture, teaching his followers how to understand and apply them. Marpeck wrote: "The Lord has opened, given and revealed His priceless treasure and gift without price. Through His divine skill, He has unlocked and released the Scriptures"<sup>37</sup>.

There was within Anabaptism a deep concern to honour Christ<sup>38</sup>, to give him first place in all aspects of life, not excluding their hermeneutics. One of the Anabaptists' fears about the Reformers' emphasis on learning and reason was that reliance on such human endeavour would dethrone Christ, in

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<sup>35</sup>Keeney, Dutch 37. Christocentrism, although closely connected with the issue of the relationship between the Testaments, is not confined to this but affects other aspects of interpretation also. See also EBI 52-3.

<sup>36</sup>AIO 150.

<sup>37</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 438.

<sup>38</sup>RR 832.

practice if not in theory<sup>39</sup>. He was to be honoured as the supreme revealer as well as the supreme revelation<sup>40</sup>. The first step in hermeneutics was to ask how Jesus would interpret a passage. Anabaptist hermeneutics were Christocentric in methodology as well as in content<sup>41</sup>.

A related concern was to safeguard the uniqueness of Jesus and his work. If other passages of Scripture - particularly in the Old Testament - were regarded as normative, Anabaptists feared that the life and work of Christ would not be given the central place they deserved<sup>42</sup>. They were wary of any interpretive system that jeopardised the centrality of Jesus, not only in the work of salvation but also in ethics. Marpeck expressed this concern in his "Confession" of 1532: "Although the godly Jews faithfully lived in external godliness and righteousness of the law because of the fear of God, it does not follow that the future righteousness, justification or sanctification was promised to Abraham, nor that he or others received it. That would be an insult which discounts the incarnation of

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<sup>39</sup>Gardner, "Menno" 105.

<sup>40</sup>Augsburger, Principles 18.

<sup>41</sup>Marpeck called Jesus "our greatest scribe and treasurer", a reference to the Gospel text about a good scribe bringing out of his storehouse things both old and new. Jesus, in Marpeck's eyes, was the wise interpreter who unerringly distinguished between texts which continued to apply to his disciples and those which did not. See Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 438ff.

<sup>42</sup>John Wenger characterised the Anabaptist position as teaching that "Christ is the center of the Bible, not only in the sense that the Old Testament prophets witnessed to his coming, and that the New Testament apostles interpreted the significance of His life, teaching, death and resurrection, but also in the sense that He, and He alone, is the absolute norm of Christian truth and the only full revelation of God": Wenger, Even 74.



Christ, His suffering, and His death"<sup>43</sup>.

Fourth, Christocentrism focused less on the creedal Christ than on the historical Jesus. Anabaptists acknowledged the Christ of the creeds but they were captivated by the Jesus of the Gospels. They shared with the Reformers a clear faith in the redeeming work of Christ as the sole basis of salvation, but they were determined also to follow Christ as their Lord and Master by doing what he told his disciples to do. For Menno, "Christ was the indispensable object of faith and the model for a Christian lifestyle. And for Menno the traditional creeds of the church were a poor substitute for Christ, who is Lord and head of the church...Menno looked to this Christ to restore the church after the pattern of the New Testament"<sup>44</sup>.

Operating with a Christocentric hermeneutic did not mean for the Anabaptists, then, that all of Scripture needed to be interpreted in the light of the doctrine of justification, but rather that all of Scripture was to be understood in the light of both the life and death of Jesus Christ. "What makes this approach to Scripture distinctive in a Reformation context," wrote Arnold Snyder, "is the fact that the emphasis appears to fall not on Christ's redemptive work but rather on Christ incarnate after whom the believer must follow"<sup>45</sup>. Or, as Norman Kraus expressed this: "In traditional Protestant theology reconciliation and justification have been

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<sup>43</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 119. Whatever the deficiencies of Marpeck's reasoning here, his concern to uphold the honour and centrality of Christ is evident.

<sup>44</sup>Estep, "Ecumenical" 358.

<sup>45</sup>Snyder, Sattler 145. See Blough, Christologie 165 for a study of Marpeck's insistence that the Christ "below" must be known and followed as well as the glorified Christ "above".

given the hermeneutical priority...In Anabaptism salvation was understood as the genuine possibility for a new life under the lordship of Christ"<sup>46</sup>. It was not that the Anabaptists denigrated the soteriological element of the New Testament's presentation of Christ, but rather that they expanded the meaning and scope of the salvation he brought in such a way that hermeneutically they could not ignore Christ as example and teacher as well as redeemer.

Fifth, Christocentrism was not equivalent to a literalistic and legalistic application of Jesus' teaching<sup>47</sup>. Although Jesus was sometimes called the new Lawgiver<sup>48</sup>, the Anabaptists did not restrict themselves to picking out his various sayings as proof-texts. His example, lifestyle, spirit, relationships and intention were also seen as crucial in providing an adequate basis from which to interpret the rest of Scripture<sup>49</sup>. Arnold Snyder wrote: "Not only do the explicit commands guide the Christian, the central guide through the Scripture is provided by the life and example of Christ"<sup>50</sup>. However, the words of Jesus were carefully studied and carried great weight<sup>51</sup>. The Sermon on the Mount seems to have acted as a further

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<sup>46</sup>Kraus, Norman: Jesus Christ Our Lord (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987) 173.

<sup>47</sup>Although this was a real danger from which they did not entirely escape. This will be considered below at pp126-7.

<sup>48</sup>See, for example, Jelis Bernaerts in MM 625; Sicke Snyder in MM 441; Menno, Works 129.

<sup>49</sup>Keeney, Dutch 37; Snyder, Sattler 119-20.

<sup>50</sup>Snyder, Sattler 145.

<sup>51</sup>Dyck concluded that it is inadequate to understand Anabaptist Christocentrism as seeing Christ as paradigmatic; rather the words of Christ were regarded as binding and authoritative: EBI 34.

canon within an already Christocentric canon<sup>52</sup>. What the Anabaptists were eager to avoid was the dilution of Jesus' authority by reducing his commands to generalisations hedged about with exceptions and qualifications.

Sixth, Christocentrism meant that Anabaptists regarded a living experience of Jesus as a prerequisite for understanding Scripture. Not only must the historical Jesus be central to the text of Scripture, but the Christ of faith must be central to the life-experience of the interpreter. Arnold Snyder, examining Sattler's views on the sword, noted that his arguments were not based on specific texts on sword but on Jesus' command in Matthew 11:29 - "learn from me". He concluded: "It is Christ as the living head and example that is decisive"<sup>53</sup>. Anabaptists based their interpretation and application of Scripture on a combination of the objective basis of Christ's clear teachings and example and the subjective basis of their personal experience of him<sup>54</sup>. Richard Gardner wrote that "Menno rightly appeals to the apostolic witness of the Christ-event in its clearer sections as a hermeneutical criterion for the whole of Scripture; and he rightly appeals to a living relationship with Jesus Christ as the contextual situation in which alone this hermeneutical criterion can truly function"<sup>55</sup>.

This combination is clear in Marpeck's writings. Writing to Schwenckfeld,

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<sup>52</sup>Balke, Calvin 313; EBI 33.

<sup>53</sup>Snyder, Sattler 120. See also EBI 58.

<sup>54</sup>This combination of objectivity and subjectivity is important and will be explored further below at pp131-6.

<sup>55</sup>Gardner, "Menno" 107.



he declared: "Christ has taught and instructed us with full understanding. He has also sent us the teacher in the heart, and the Comforter to comfort, and to teach us with Jesus' own words and teaching...We are taught not by the human voice, but by the literal, external teaching of Christ and the apostolic teaching of the gospel. We are taught, not by men, but by God, the Holy Spirit Himself"<sup>56</sup>. And for Sattler, the solidarity which he believed existed between Christ, the head, and the members of his body meant that Christ was "the norm to which explicit appeal must be made in order to settle disputes of faith and practice, regardless of the functional use which one might make of Scripture or the tradition of the church"<sup>57</sup>. The Anabaptists' sense of solidarity<sup>58</sup> with Jesus precluded any interpretive methodology which failed to take his words and example with the utmost seriousness.

#### D. Anabaptism - A Christocentric Movement

To understand the significance of this Christocentric approach to hermeneutics, and to discover its sources, some attention must be given to its relationship with the Christocentrism that permeated Anabaptism, and to the question of the relationship between the Testaments.

The Christocentric approach to hermeneutics was not an isolated phenomenon

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<sup>56</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 450-51.

<sup>57</sup>Weaver, "Discipleship" 257. He continued: "He [Sattler] grounds his canon within the canon theologically on the fact that the members of the body cannot be different from the head. The primary materials thus turn out to be those which most directly discuss the head of the body and portray him to believers: Weaver, "Discipleship" 261.

<sup>58</sup>See Driver's book review comments in Kauffman, Appraisals 100.

within Anabaptism. Jesus was central to their theology, ecclesiology, ethics, hymnology<sup>59</sup> and spirituality. The Anabaptists were orthodox trinitarians<sup>60</sup> and actually emphasised the person and work of the Holy Spirit more than most of the Reformers<sup>61</sup>, but the emphasis on Jesus throughout the movement is unmistakable. They accepted the Reformers' understanding of the atonement and rejoiced in Jesus as redeemer and risen Lord, but they were drawn as few others in their generation were to the Jesus of the Gospels. They were orthodox in their view of the divinity of Christ<sup>62</sup> (indeed some were criticised for underemphasising his humanity in their views on the incarnation<sup>63</sup>), but their determination to listen to, understand and imitate the historical Jesus distinguished them from their contemporaries<sup>64</sup>.

The Anabaptists had little interest in abstract theology and metaphysical speculations. They generally accepted the Reformers' views on Christology and soteriology - that they did not major on these issues in their writings has led some to accuse them of devaluing them, but the paucity of treatment is due rather to the fact that they had no argument with their

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<sup>59</sup>See Overholt, Joseph: Theological Themes in the Hymns of the Ausbund (Uniontown, PA: private publication, 1980) 68.

<sup>60</sup>Estep, Anabaptist 124.

<sup>61</sup>See below at pp184ff.

<sup>62</sup>Marpeck in AIO 32; Schiemer in AIO 27; and AIO 23. Only on the fringes of the movement were there any hints of a denial of Christ's divinity. See Klaassen, in Goertz, Umstrittenen 292.

<sup>63</sup>In particular Menno Simons and Dirk Phillips, whose "celestial flesh" Christology, derived from Hoffman's teaching, seemed to many to be docetic.

<sup>64</sup>From an Anabaptist perspective both the Reformers and the Spiritualists, from very different starting points, seemed to denigrate the humanity of Jesus and his exemplary role towards believers.

contemporaries in these areas. They gratefully accepted the Reformers' insights on these matters, but their main interest was elsewhere.

Christocentrism meant for Anabaptists that Jesus was not only central for their salvation but for their lives as saved people<sup>65</sup>. He was the norm against which their words and deeds would be judged<sup>66</sup>, the example they were to follow<sup>67</sup>, the Master they were to obey<sup>68</sup>, the Captain who would fight with and for them in the battles they faced<sup>69</sup>. They studied his life and ministry to discover how to live, and they found his example and teachings relevant to many issues. "The Lord's ministry of preaching and service, His sweeping rejection of social and political structures, His mobility and freedom from cultural attachments, His eschatological outlook, and His love and non-resistance are accepted as normative for all believers"<sup>70</sup>.

It is against this background that the Anabaptists' Christocentric hermeneutic should be understood. Their approach to Scripture was consistent with their attitude to other issues. As Oosterbaan concluded, "the

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<sup>65</sup>Augsburger, Principles 4, 27.

<sup>66</sup>Weaver, Becoming 118.

<sup>67</sup>Sattler wrote to the church at Horb: "Be mindful of your predecessor, Jesus Christ, and follow after him in faith and obedience, love and longsuffering": Yoder, Legacy 61.

<sup>68</sup>Walter of Stoelwijk in MM 458-9.

<sup>69</sup>Walter of Stoelwijk (MM 458), Joriaen Simons (MM 565), Jacques d'Auchy (MM 606), Jerome Segers (MM 504). See also Klaassen & Klassen, Marpeck 167.

<sup>70</sup>Burkholder, J Lawrence: "The Anabaptist Vision of Discipleship", in Hershberger, Recovery 136-7. See also Weaver, Becoming 120, 134.



total Christocentric view of the Bible, the reality of the new man in Christ, the church of newborn believers, and baptism upon confession of faith...all this forms an organic theology which fits together and of which no single part can be missing"<sup>71</sup>.

A question that arises is whether their distinctive approach to hermeneutics produced this radical Christocentrism, or whether their hermeneutic resulted from an already established Christocentrism. Henry Poettcker suggested that for Menno, at least, his approach to Scripture was "but the corollary of his basic affirmation - the centrality of Jesus Christ"<sup>72</sup>.

And Willem Balke, in a passage quoted above<sup>73</sup>, concluded that the Sermon on the Mount functioned as a key for Anabaptist hermeneutics because its emphases coincided with their prior convictions. When the source of these affirmations and convictions is sought, however, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that they were based on a particular way of studying and interpreting Scripture.

Oosterbaan's phrase "organic theology" seems a fair summary of this inter-relationship between hermeneutics and Christocentrism, especially in the light of the Anabaptists' known distaste for theoretical theologising.

Their study of Scripture drew them to the Jesus of the Gospels and they based their hermeneutic on ensuring that he retained the central place.

Their experience of Jesus and the attraction they felt towards him resulted in their Bible study being focused on his life and teachings. Ben Ollenburger argued that the Anabaptists were thereby caught in a hermeneu-

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<sup>71</sup>Quoted in Estep, Anabaptist 175.

<sup>72</sup>EBI 70.

<sup>73</sup>See footnote 52 at p116.

tical circle<sup>74</sup>, and some of the criticisms of this aspect of their hermeneutics relate to this issue, but on the whole, it seems to have functioned more as a spiral in which the Christocentrism and hermeneutics of the Anabaptists reinforced and clarified each other.

It is important to emphasise, however, that Christocentrism was much more to the Anabaptists than a hermeneutical method. All hermeneutics was subordinate to the practical following of Jesus Christ. They were not interested in finding some central concept from which to develop a harmonious system for interpreting Scripture. They were interested in discovering and doing the will of God, and they believed that this was to be found most clearly in the life and teachings of Jesus.

As noted above<sup>75</sup>, Anabaptists combined a tremendous love for Scripture with a refusal to place it above or even alongside Christ as the Word of God. Though accused of biblicism, they were concerned that Scripture was actually being over-valued by the Reformers and that Christ's authority was being compromised. Their radical Christocentrism in hermeneutics can be seen as an attempt to redress this balance by retaining a high view of Scripture but insisting it be interpreted according to the "intention of Jesus Christ." As Norman Kraus pointed out, "Anabaptism as a whole was Jesus-centred rather than Bible-centred. As central as the Bible was for them it remained a tool, a witness to Jesus Christ and not an end in itself"<sup>76</sup>.

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<sup>74</sup>EBI 58. This will be explored further below at pp134-6.

<sup>75</sup>See above at pp37-8.

<sup>76</sup>Kraus, C Norman: Evangelicalism and Anabaptism (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979) 173.

Ben Ollenburger wrote that they "spoke of following Jesus in a strange way, as if they knew him apart from the texts of the Gospels - as those who had met him in life and who, therefore, looked to the Scriptures for guidance...they recognized that the movement is from knowledge of Christ to the understanding of Scripture"<sup>77</sup>. And John Yoder commented, with reference to the Swiss Brethren's rejection of killing, that this was not based on "a particular interpretation of a particular biblical text, but rather a profound understanding of what it means to share in the suffering of Christ"<sup>78</sup>. A knowledge of Jesus in the interpreter's life, or empathy with him, was a necessary prerequisite for understanding Scripture, although this knowledge of Jesus was only valid insofar as it conformed to the Jesus revealed in Scripture.

Another question which may arise is whether the Christocentrism of Anabaptist hermeneutics was the source of their views on the relationship between the Testaments<sup>79</sup>, or whether their focus on the New Testament resulted in their pronounced Christocentrism. It is theoretically possible that either might have been the source of the other. However, in the light of the above discussion, it seems clear that Christocentrism was not derived from the Anabaptist commitment to the primacy of the New Testament, but was the source of this commitment. Certainly, no other adequate explanation has been put forward to explain the Anabaptists'

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<sup>77</sup>EBI 58.

<sup>78</sup>Yoder: "The Contemporary Evangelical Revival and the Peace Churches", in Ramseyer, Robert L: Mission and the Peace Witness (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979) 93.

<sup>79</sup>These views will be explored in the next section. See below at pp143ff.



position on the two Testaments<sup>80</sup>.

There are indications in several passages already quoted in this section that the principle of Christocentrism was frequently expanded to include the teachings of the apostles, those who shared the experiences of the human Jesus and were commissioned as his witnesses<sup>81</sup>. A further quotation from Menno shows the Anabaptists' thinking about this expansion. He claimed to "follow Christ's plain Word and command, the doctrine and usage of the holy apostles in the first, unfalsified church"<sup>82</sup>. Anabaptists' wariness when urged to accept church traditions and the opinions of church fathers resulted from their belief that the church had fallen and become "falsified". They were content, however, to accept the apostles' teaching and practice as a norm alongside that of Jesus because they were confident that the earliest church and its apostolic leaders were close enough to Jesus to avoid such compromises.

Thus, while the Gospels were given top priority because they were the primary documents dealing with Jesus' life, it was recognised that the apostles who either wrote or were the subjects of other New Testament books were faithful heirs of Jesus' teaching. The New Testament writings in general, therefore, because of their intimate connection with Jesus, were accorded greater authority than the Old Testament. The way in which

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<sup>80</sup>Indeed, John Yoder concluded that "the origins of Anabaptist originality on this point, already visible in September of 1524, have not yet been traced". See EBI 28. It is the submission of this study that its origins are to be found in the logical extension of Christocentrism to embrace the rest of the New Testament.

<sup>81</sup>See, for example, the references at notes 7, 14, 17 and 56 above.

<sup>82</sup>Menno, Works 713.

Anabaptists handled the two Testaments resulted from an extension of their fundamental Christocentrism<sup>83</sup>.

It is evident from the way Anabaptists spoke and wrote about Jesus that they felt a marked affinity with him in their lifestyle, sufferings and interests<sup>84</sup>. The more they read the story of Jesus, the more they realised its relevance to their lives and situations, and the more determined they were to read the rest of Scripture from this centre rather than allowing Jesus to be marginalised.

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<sup>83</sup>See, for example, Hubmaier's "Dialogue with Zwingli's Baptism Book" of 1526, where he argued that "concerning the ceremonies of the Old Testament, however, we find that God himself has abolished them...But concerning the ceremonies of the New Testament we do not read that Christ has done away with them. These one should and must keep according to the institution of Christ": see Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 179. For Hubmaier the primacy of the New Testament resulted from his Christocentrism. See also Weaver, Becoming, p118.

<sup>84</sup>See particularly the many examples of this in MM.

## E. Christocentric or Christological

Comparing the Christocentric Anabaptist hermeneutics with the Reformers' methodology reveals the distinctive nature of the Anabaptists' approach.

The Reformers' hermeneutics can fairly be described, explicitly or implicitly<sup>1</sup>, as Christological. Jesus Christ was regarded as the supreme revelation of God to humankind, and his death, resurrection and ascension as God's central acts in history. The biblical message was that through these events salvation was available to those who would believe. The whole of Scripture testified to this central truth. With this the Anabaptists heartily agreed. However, the Reformers' emphasis was less on Jesus himself and more on his salvific acts and the doctrine of justification by faith. In this sense it might be as accurate to describe the Reformers' hermeneutics as soteriological: their understanding of salvation provided the hermeneutical key to Scripture.

Anabaptist hermeneutics, however, were not only Christological but Christocentric, in the sense that they focused on Jesus himself rather than primarily on a doctrine describing the effects of his redeeming work. For them, he was not only redeemer but also the example they were to

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<sup>1</sup>Explicitly with Luther: see George, Theology 81; Ebeling, Luther 104. Implicitly with Melanchthon: see Steinmetz, Reformers 74; Rogers & McKim, Authority 149 (but cf McGrath, Intellectual 67). Implicitly with Calvin: see Farley, Calvin 26; Rogers & McKim, Authority 126.



imitate and the teacher they were to learn from<sup>2</sup>. Their Christocentrism was tied more firmly to the human Jesus than was the Reformers' Christological approach<sup>3</sup>, and their interpretations of the rest of Scripture were significantly different as a result<sup>4</sup>. It was this that made their hermeneutics distinctive in the Reformation context<sup>5</sup>.

This distinctiveness can be seen in the following passage from Luther's writings<sup>6</sup>:

Now because much more depends upon the word than upon the works and deeds of Christ, and because if we had to do without one or the other, it would be better to lack the works and the history than the words and the doctrine, it is fair to give the highest praise to those books which deal more with the doctrine and the words of the Lord Christ.

First, Luther was operating with a "canon within the canon" just as the Anabaptists were<sup>7</sup>. His canon was different from theirs, but it meant that he ranked New Testament books depending on how well they seemed to teach

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<sup>2</sup>Menno wrote: "All the Scriptures...point us to Jesus Christ that we are to follow him" (Menno, Works 749 - italics mine). The Reformers would have agreed with the first part of this statement but their emphasis in the second part would have been quite different, emphasising Christ's work for the believer rather than the believer's response to Christ.

<sup>3</sup>Alternatively, the same distinction could be expressed by recognising that Anabaptist Christology had different emphases from the Reformers' Christology.

<sup>4</sup>See Davis: "Anabaptism and Ascetic Holiness", in Stayer & Packull, Anabaptists 59. He contrasted Luther's "soteriological hermeneutic centred on justification by faith" with the Anabaptists' hermeneutic which was "not only Christological but ethical and practical."

<sup>5</sup>See Snyder, Sattler 145. Snyder used the term "practical Christocentrism" to distinguish the Anabaptists' approach from the more doctrinal stance of the Reformers.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Ebeling, Luther 131.

<sup>7</sup>See also EBI 34.

the soteriological emphasis that was so precious to him. As Timothy George commented, he "did not read the Bible univocally"<sup>8</sup>. He regarded Paul's Epistles as primary because of their doctrinal content, and disdained the Epistle of James because it lacked such content. The Gospels were ranked below the Epistles - the reverse of the Anabaptists' assessment.

Second, Luther's main interest was in Christ as redeemer and the doctrine of justification by faith. He subordinated the life, teaching and ministry of Jesus to a minor role, even suggesting that to know nothing of these would not be a catastrophic loss<sup>9</sup>. For Anabaptists, such a divorce between the human Jesus and the Christ of faith was untenable. To them, Luther's approach might have been Christological but it was not Christocentric, and they felt it dishonoured Christ. They feared the Reformers had lost sight of Jesus as a person and were left only with a theological principle.

There were other differences too. Some have already been noted in analysing the implications of the principle of Christocentrism. One of these - the sense in which the entire Bible points to Christ - requires further attention. The Reformers shared with the Anabaptists a conviction that the whole Bible pointed to Christ. In their interpretation of the Old Testament, especially, their main concern was to "find" Christ in the texts. William Klassen wrote: "For both Luther and Calvin the central criterion for the use of a given book of the Bible is whether or not it promotes Christ, and the purpose of much of their Old Testament exegesis becomes the promotion of Christ"<sup>10</sup>. Because their interest was primarily

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<sup>8</sup>George, Theology 83.

<sup>9</sup>Ebeling, Luther 131.

<sup>10</sup>Klassen, Covenant 61.

in the doctrinal rather than the exemplary aspect of Christology, they found ways of interpreting a wide range of texts in a way that conformed to their doctrinal concerns<sup>11</sup>.

The Anabaptists, however, though equally interested in interpreting biblical texts in a way that pointed to Christ, did not feel able to interpret them in this way because of their concern to focus on the historical Jesus. Marpeck, particularly, was very reticent about "finding" the divine Christ in the Old Testament and refused to discover the human Christ there at all<sup>12</sup>. Although the Anabaptists used allegorical devices to expound the Old Testament, they drew the line at schemes which appeared to locate Jesus where he could not historically have been.

In this way, their emphasis on the human Jesus acted as a useful corrective to the Reformers' speculative efforts to "find" Christ in Old Testament texts<sup>13</sup>. As Duncan Ferguson argued, "It does not necessarily violate the integrity of a historical approach to maintain that Christ is prefigured in the Old Testament. But to find him everywhere is to contradict the literal-historical principle of interpretation and to fail to appreciate the historical context and message"<sup>14</sup>. As the Bern Colloquy stated, the Anabaptists' view was that the Old Testament was "a witness to

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<sup>11</sup>Kraus, Jesus 84.

<sup>12</sup>Klassen, Covenant 61.

<sup>13</sup>Klaassen wrote: "Luther began to look for Christ everywhere and found him everywhere, especially in the Old Testament. The [Anabaptists'] emphasis on the human physical Jesus places historical limitations on the interpretation of Scripture": EBI 7. Klaassen noted, though, that some Anabaptists, in particular Hans Hut, tended towards a more mystical view of Christ that was closer to Luther's views - but this view did not commend itself to most Anabaptists.

<sup>14</sup>Ferguson, Biblical 164.



Christ"<sup>15</sup>, rather than a place where Christ could be found wearing a variety of ingenious disguises.

In summary, therefore, the Anabaptists' distinctiveness on this issue consisted in the following: a focus on the person of Jesus rather than a doctrine based on his saving actions; an emphasis on the humanity of the historical Jesus; a willingness to start with Jesus and accept his deeds and words as normative on many more topics than the Reformers accepted; an extension of the principle of Christocentrism to embrace the whole of the New Testament; and an emphasis on the cruciality of a life-experience of the living Jesus as a prerequisite for all interpreters, a prerequisite that no amount of education could replace.

This hermeneutical difference resulted from and is consistent with the distinctive approach to Christology that characterised the Anabaptists, and set them apart from their contemporaries. Walter Klaassen concluded: "In Protestantism we meet with a celestial Christ, a cosmic figure who through his self-sacrifice makes possible the salvation of the soul. In Catholicism Jesus is frequently and boldly encountered in the Mass, where he is constantly offered up again for the sins of man. In Anabaptism we encounter what we can only anachronistically call the 'historical Jesus'. Jesus is all that the historic creeds claim for him but he is also more. For he is also the example for the Christian...He is not only the centre of a theological system to which one gives assent. Rather he is the centre

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<sup>15</sup>A10 150.

of a way of life"<sup>16</sup>.

Myron Augsburger distinguished Anabaptism from Protestantism similarly, although in different terms: "If Luther's hermeneutical approach was anthropological (beginning with man's need for forgiveness), and Calvin's approach was theological (beginning with God's sovereignty and man's election), the Anabaptist approach could be described as Christological (beginning with the emphasis on Christ's call to a 'new creature' expressed in discipleship"<sup>17</sup>. The approaches of both Luther and Calvin, despite their differences, focused on salvation and were phrased in doctrinal terms. The Anabaptist approach focused on the new life to which salvation leads and was experiential and ethical in its formulation. It was Christological, not in the sense in which the Reformers were Christological, but in the more radical sense of a thoroughgoing Christocentrism.

Cornelius Dyck summed up the radical challenge of this approach in the sixteenth century: "When the Anabaptists insisted on following strictly the words and example of Jesus, this was not easily understood or accepted. Most could think of Jesus as a dying Savior, or as a future judge, but not as someone to follow earnestly in life...The call to 'follow Christ in life' may seem self-evident today, but for the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century it was a rare and daring claim, and a

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<sup>16</sup>Klaassen: "The Modern Relevance of Anabaptism", in Goertz, Umstrittenen 292. To this summary should be added, however, the Anabaptists' emphasis on the living Christ, in solidarity with whom they lived. It was this combination of emphases on the historical Jesus and the living Christ that characterised, directed and energised Anabaptism.

<sup>17</sup>Augsburger, Principles 20.

costly one, for the path of Christ led to the cross"<sup>18</sup>.

## F. Criticisms and Evaluation

Practising a Christocentric hermeneutic was very costly for the early Anabaptists, because this approach provoked considerable criticism from their contemporaries. The Reformers seem to have been unable to grasp the attractiveness of Jesus to the Anabaptists and the eagerness with which they accepted the challenge to imitate and follow him. They failed to appreciate that the zeal with which they embraced the revolutionary doctrine of justification by faith alone was not dissimilar to that with which Anabaptists embarked on a life of discipleship based on the life of Jesus.

The Anabaptists were accused of various errors in relation to their Christocentric emphasis<sup>19</sup>. First, they were charged with literalism and legalism<sup>20</sup>, with naively trying to copy Jesus and turn him into a new lawgiver, rather than seeing him as the unique Saviour whose sacrifice set them free from bondage to law-keeping. The Reformers preferred to emphasise general principles such as "love" and "faith" rather than focusing on

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<sup>18</sup>Dyck, Cornelius: An Introduction to Mennonite History (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1967) 138-9. The only comparable response in the sixteenth century was within monasticism.

<sup>19</sup>The accusation that their Christocentrism resulted in the Old Testament being depreciated will be explored in the following section. See below at pp143ff.

<sup>20</sup>See, for example, Blanke's comments on the difference between Zwingli and Grebel on the interpreting of specific texts: Blanke, Brothers 10. On Melanchthon's criticisms, see Oyer, Lutheran 145ff.



specific commandments. This issue has already been considered<sup>21</sup> in the analysis of Anabaptist Christocentrism, where evidence was adduced from various sources to demonstrate that, although the Anabaptists did slip into both literalism and legalism in their determination to obey Jesus' teachings, their hermeneutic was more sophisticated than this. They were unwilling to settle for the generalities the Reformers proposed, but they were interested in the spirit and intention of Christ as well as in his specific words and actions<sup>22</sup>.

Second, the Reformers suspected that this emphasis on Jesus as example rather than redeemer was a step away from the radical Reformation principle of *sola gratia* and back into some form of works-righteousness<sup>23</sup>. The "imitation of Christ" was a popular medieval theme and not one that the Reformers entirely jettisoned from their preaching, but it was always kept subordinate to the doctrine of *solafideism*. The Anabaptists argued repeatedly that they were not reverting to a works-righteousness, but that the Reformers were themselves unbalanced in teaching "faith alone". They felt that the Catholic "works without faith" had been replaced by a Protestant "faith without works" because of the failure to see Jesus as teacher and example as well as Saviour. In the early years of the Reformation, while the principle of justification by faith was still being

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<sup>21</sup>See above at pp115-6. Accusations of literalism and legalism relate to several aspects of Anabaptist hermeneutics. Although these will be noted in each section, a comprehensive examination of this issue will be undertaken in the section on "Spirit and Word". See below at pp184ff.

<sup>22</sup>A potentially subjective criterion. On this see below at pp134-6.

<sup>23</sup>See Dyck, Mennonite 138-9. On the Reformer Menius' criticisms of the Anabaptists on this issue, see Oyer, Lutheran 181ff.

established, the Reformers understandably feared that the Anabaptists were risking the compromise and obfuscation of this principle. But for the Anabaptists, this was a risk worth taking in order to avoid the opposite danger of nominal Christianity, where creedal assent replaced discipleship.

Third, they were accused of placing too much emphasis on the human Jesus and too little on the risen and ascended Lord. Zwingli, in particular, felt that they were Pelagian in their doctrine of the will, laying too much stress on Christ's earthly example and too little on his resurrection and ascension<sup>24</sup>. The early German Anabaptists were accused by the Reformer Urbanus Rhegius of the two related errors of reducing Christ to teacher and example only, and of underplaying the effects of the fall by over-emphasising the *imago dei* in man<sup>25</sup>. And Bucer criticised Kautz for his "reduction of the atoning role of Christ to that of exemplar"<sup>26</sup>. It is difficult to know how to evaluate these charges. There are many passages in Anabaptist writings which teach clearly that Christ is the Redeemer, ascended Lord and coming Judge. But because they agreed with the Reformers on this subject it did not occupy their polemical writings in the way that their emphasis on the human and exemplary Jesus did. By emphasising an aspect of Christology that they felt the Reformers were neglecting, the Anabaptists have given a perhaps unwarranted impression that they were less committed to other aspects of Reformation Christology.

Further criticisms of the Anabaptists have been made by later scholars,

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<sup>24</sup>Reardon, Religious 215; and RR 194.

<sup>25</sup>Packull, Mysticism 96ff.

<sup>26</sup>RR 162.



many of whom were in sympathy with their basic stance. William Keeney identified a problem that was recognised by some Anabaptists themselves, namely, "if one does not look to the Scripture as a law book but to find the intention of Jesus Christ, one has a certain measure of subjectivity and tends towards individualism"<sup>27</sup>. Some would feel that the Anabaptists tended to use Scripture as a law book and hence were in little danger of such subjectivity, but the various references within Anabaptist writings to such things as the spirit, intention and mind of Christ suggest that Keeney has recognised a potentially difficult issue here<sup>28</sup>.

Ben Ollenburger's comments about Menno and the hermeneutical circle, referred to above, are relevant here also: "The logic of [Menno's] claim is that after we know 'the intention of Jesus Christ' we may proceed to interpret the whole Bible. However we would assume that the Bible would have to be interpreted before one could determine 'the intention of Jesus Christ'...He comes to the texts of Scripture guided by his picture of a pattern of life given concrete embodiment in Jesus Christ and in the believers"<sup>29</sup>.

Robert Holland, a less sympathetic Reformed critic, applied a comment of Roland Bainton about Neo-orthodoxy to Anabaptism, seeing an interesting parallel here. Bainton warned about exaggerations resulting from attempts to "derive everything from Christ, including religious knowledge, salva-

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<sup>27</sup>Keeney, Dutch 41.

<sup>28</sup>This issue will be considered below in the section on "Spirit and Word". See below at pp184ff.

<sup>29</sup>EBI 51. See also Kraus, God 51.



tion and ethics"<sup>30</sup>. Holland believed the Anabaptists were guilty of such a "hyper-Christological" interpretation and that this resulted in their ignoring "linguistic, historical, theological, cultural and homiletical principles. These are not invalid simply because one wishes to be 'Christocentric'"<sup>31</sup>. This warning is salutary but should perhaps be applied at least as much to the Reformers' Christological approach which "discovered" Christ in the Old Testament in a way that sidestepped these very hermeneutical considerations.

The important question is how the "spirit, intention and mind of Christ" are known. If it is maintained that these are clear from the teachings of Christ, the danger of using the Gospels as a law book is very real, and this phrase risks being devoid of content. But if the intention of Christ is derived from non-biblical sources, such as the Anabaptists' experience of Christ, or from certain fundamental convictions about the historical Jesus, the danger of subjectivity and of imposing an extra-biblical interpretive grid upon Scripture is not easy to avoid.

There may be a mediating alternative, whereby the intention of Christ is found solely in Scripture but, instead of being tied to specific teachings, is derived from considering the whole life of Jesus, his relationships, social behaviour, priorities, commitments and the direction

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<sup>30</sup>Bainton, Roland: Studies in the Reformation (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1964) 114.

<sup>31</sup>Holland, Hermeneutics 139.

of his ministry<sup>32</sup>. There is no evidence that the Anabaptists adopted such a position, but it may be suggested as a way to address two contrasting problems in their approach - subjectivity and legalism. It must be acknowledged that attempts to derive the intention of Christ from Scripture in such a way are still prone to subjectivity, or even to legalism if certain texts are given excessive weight, but recognising the dangers and attempting to balance objective and subjective factors may avert the worst excesses.

A second criticism to which little attention has been given is the danger that Christocentrism is confused with "Gospelcentrism" - the assumption that Christ is primarily revealed in the accounts of his earthly ministry. Certainly the Anabaptists gave priority to the Gospels in the New Testament. It is arguable that this resulted in a distorted view of Christ and ignored the revelation of Jesus that the rest of the New Testament provides - not only doctrinal reflection on his life, death, resurrection and ascension, but also certain teachings attributed to him in the Epistles though not recorded in the Gospels, and the letters from the risen Jesus to the churches in the book of Revelation. A rigid "Gospelcentrism" ignores Jesus' own promise that the Holy Spirit would continue to teach the disciples and remind them of the things they had

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<sup>32</sup>Norman Kraus appears to have adopted this solution. He wrote: "The centrality of the Christ event gives us a criterion to determine the meaning and relative applicability of individual statements or teachings within the various writings, both Old and New Testaments": see Kraus, God 61.



heard from him<sup>33</sup>. The Anabaptist approach can be appreciated as a corrective to the Reformers' tendency to give too little attention to the Gospels and the earthly Jesus, but it may tend rather too far in the opposite direction.

In common with their contemporaries, the Anabaptists did not ask questions about the extent to which the Gospel records reflect the perceptions and concerns of the writers and their readers. They treated the Gospels as simply accounts of Jesus' life and teachings. However, the more it is felt that the Gospel writers were selective in their recording of Jesus' teachings and that they offered a certain interpretation of his ministry, the less easy it becomes to defend giving the Gospels priority over the rest of the New Testament, especially since many of the Epistles were written before the Gospels. The fact remains, though, that the Gospels contain most of what is known about Jesus' earthly life, however much this may be filtered through the perceptions and interests of the writers. Provided these writers are accepted as essentially trustworthy, a powerful case can still be made out for interpreting the rest of the New Testament in the light of the Jesus revealed in these primary sources.

Furthermore, it is arguable that operating with the Gospels (a narrative genre) as the primary "canon within the canon", rather than with the propositional and doctrinal focus of the Reformers, has positive implications for hermeneutics. In particular, it encourages practical application

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<sup>33</sup>Willard Swartley has suggested that true Christocentrism "does not mean the Gospels against Paul, or Paul against James, but rather a dedicated effort to find the pulse of Jesus' authority in every New Testament writing, and more indirectly in the Old Testament as well": Swartley, in the Conrad Grebel lecture 31/10/79 entitled "How then shall we read the Bible ?"



and personal discipleship rather than intellectual discussion. It fosters an encounter with the Lord of the Scriptures rather than with the text alone. It also goes some way towards bridging the gap between the biblical and contemporary horizons by involving the reader in a story, a genre which contains many transcultural elements.

Third, Walter Klaassen criticised the Anabaptists for their selectivity in listening to Jesus: they "listened to Jesus the anti-ritualist while neglecting to notice that he continued to participate in the rituals of Judaism"<sup>34</sup>. The danger of eisegesis rather than exegesis is perhaps inevitable in a Christocentric hermeneutic, unless this is balanced by other principles. The Anabaptists might perhaps have retorted that at least they were attempting to listen to Jesus, rather than practising the kind of selectivity that meant filtering out most of his specific challenges to leave only bland general principles. The extent to which other aspects of their hermeneutics offset this selectivity will need to be assessed when the inter-relationship of these is considered.

Fourth, Stanley Samartha warned<sup>35</sup> that Christocentrism can degenerate into "Christomonism" and Jesus into a cult figure unless it is remembered that "although the witness of the New Testament writers is Christocentric, Jesus Christ himself is theocentric". Although not written with the Anabaptists in view, this comment seems applicable, if not to their hermeneutic, at least to one way in which it might be applied by the

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<sup>34</sup>Klaassen, Neither 71.

<sup>35</sup>Samartha: "The Lordship of Christ and Religious Pluralism", in Anderson, Gerald H & Stransky, Thomas F: Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981) 27.

unwary. But there need be no slide from Christocentrism to Christomonism, nor a dichotomy between theocentricity and Christocentricity. Jesus Christ can be seen as the focal point of God's self-revelation without denying the reality of such revelation in other parts of Scripture (and indeed beyond Scripture); and the incarnation should be understood as the revelation of God in Christ rather than a revelation of Christ alone<sup>36</sup>.

There is no indication Anabaptists thought in these dichotomous terms. Rothmann, for example, wrote that "the content of the whole Scripture is briefly summarized in this: Honour and fear God the almighty in Christ his Son"<sup>37</sup>. Nevertheless, Christocentrism inevitably runs the risk of giving too little attention to the revelation of God the Father that is communicated throughout the Bible, albeit most clearly through his Son. Attempting to interpret every text in the light of Christ risks failing to meet God the Father in many parts of Scripture.

Fifth, the Anabaptists' laudable desire to honour Jesus as the authoritative interpreter of Scripture and to base their hermeneutic on his failed to consider if his interpretive methodology was intended as a model for all future interpreters. It is arguable that he used the Old Testament in an appropriate way within his culture and in line with rabbinic customs, albeit introducing new elements also, but that this methodology is not appropriate for later generations of interpreters in different settings, although lessons can still be learned from his approach. This is a view that would not have been considered by the Anabaptists, nor would it have

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<sup>36</sup>See Scriven, Charles: The Transformation of Culture (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988) 162-3.

<sup>37</sup>AIO 150.



commended itself to them, given their suspicion of intellectual arguments, but it is a question that contemporary interpreters would raise concerning their Christocentric hermeneutic.

Finally, some criticisms emerged from within the Anabaptist movement itself. Hubmaier questioned the extent to which Jesus should function as a model for believers. Since he was the unique redeemer, how far should his disciples, whose role was different, act differently from him ? While not dissenting from the general emphasis on Christocentrism, Hubmaier did not apply this to the same extent as many of his colleagues. As a consequence he had a more positive view of the Old Testament and was prepared to accept that believers could participate in magisterial functions on the grounds that Jesus' refusal to do this was related to his unique mission and was not something to be copied by his followers<sup>38</sup>. The uniqueness of Jesus is an important emphasis which acts as a counterbalance to the emphasis on following his example and helps to prevent illegitimate conclusions being drawn. Some Anabaptist writings display an imbalance in this area, confusing aspects of Jesus' life which related to his redemptorial function and aspects that can properly be imitated by his followers.

Two general responses can be made to these varied criticisms. First, the Anabaptists need to be seen as correcting imbalances that they perceived among their contemporaries. Many criticisms made of them are simply statements of the alternative emphasis. The value and significance of the Anabaptists' contribution can be appreciated without either regarding this

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<sup>38</sup>Beachey, Grace 157; Klaassen, "Speaking" 139.



as sufficient on its own or dismissing other emphases as less important. Second, Christocentrism was only one of several hermeneutical principles operating among the Anabaptists. Some of the weaknesses to which these criticisms draw attention are compensated for by other aspects of Anabaptist hermeneutics<sup>39</sup>.

The significance of this Christocentric hermeneutic in the sixteenth century was that it acted as a corrective to the more doctrinal hermeneutics of the Reformers. It was in one sense more radical in that it called men and women to a life of costly and specific discipleship based on the example of Jesus; and in another sense less radical in that it represented a middle option between the Protestant emphasis on faith alone and the Catholic emphasis on works. The constant references to the teachings and actions of Jesus Christ challenged the Reformers and questioned the development of theology detached from the historical Jesus. And on ethical issues, the Anabaptist practice of starting with Jesus led to very different conclusions from those reached by the Reformers who struggled to fit Jesus in with their ethical convictions.

John Yoder suggested that the Anabaptist challenge on this issue has offered to the church an alternative to the accepted divorce between Christology and ethics. He wrote: "There being no essential structural connection between Christ and ethics, except the negative one that we are saved by Christ instead of works, Protestants have had to choose between a high Christology and a high ethic. The Anabaptist claim that Christ is authoritative in ethics in the same way as for soteriology...avoided such a posing of alternatives, and perceived that a high ethic and a high

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<sup>39</sup>See below at pp293ff.

Christology are possible only together"<sup>40</sup>. Far from compromising Christology for the sake of ethics, as the Reformers accused the Anabaptists of doing, it is arguable that the Anabaptists, by being radically Christocentric, were in fact embracing a higher and more rounded Christology than the Reformers.

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<sup>40</sup>Yoder, John: "The Prophetic Dissent of the Anabaptists", in Hersberger, Recovery 99.

### A. Introduction

The Anabaptist view of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments has been mentioned in earlier sections. In this section, that view will be explored in detail by considering several inter-related issues: the different weight given by Anabaptists and Reformers to the continuity and discontinuity between the two Testaments; the origins of the distinctive Anabaptist position on this issue; the relationship between the new and old covenants; and the implications of this approach for the Anabaptists' theology and ethics.

### B. Old and New Testaments

In the early sixteenth century, the relationship between the Testaments was much debated. William Klassen wrote: "With the restoration of the Bible to the common man at the time of the Reformation one of the most urgent problems to emerge was the authority of the Old Testament"<sup>1</sup>. The urgency related to the fact that within Christendom many issues were decided by reference to the Old Testament, but those with access to Scripture were now questioning about the applicability of these references and the often rather different contents of the New Testament. It was not primarily the Reformers, however, who were asking these questions or eager to deal with them. Nor were they addressed by church leaders like Thomas Muntzer, whose programmes and methods were rooted in Old Testament understandings. It was the challenge presented by the Anabaptists which

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<sup>1</sup>EBI 91.



helped to place the issue firmly on the Reformation agenda<sup>2</sup>.

Views about the relationship between the Testaments can be (rather simplistically) categorised with reference to two opposite poles of "continuity" and "discontinuity". The following selection from Anabaptist writings indicates that their approach was located considerably closer to the discontinuity pole than the Reformers' approach. For Anabaptists, this was a crucial issue which undergirded many of their disagreements with the Reformers, and they wrote at length to explain and defend their practice. Although there were exceptions<sup>3</sup>, Anabaptists were in substantial agreement on this issue.

In their letter to Müntzer, the Swiss Brethren raised an issue that revealed the approach of the earliest Anabaptists to the relationship between the Testaments. The letter concluded, "And so we think alike in everything except that we learned with sorrow that you have set up tablets, for which we can find neither text nor example in the New

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<sup>2</sup>Klassen commented that on this issue the Anabaptists "provoked the discussion and determined its course to a much greater extent than is generally recognised": Klassen, Covenant 104. See also Stephens, Theology 123 for an assessment of the influence of the Anabaptist challenge on Zwingli's views on the relationship between the Testaments.

<sup>3</sup>The Münsterites made a major shift from seeing the New Testament as normative to treating the Old Testament as their guide: see Krahn, Dutch 140. Rothmann wrote that the Old Testament Scriptures were "authoritative" and that lesser attention should be paid to the "books of the New Testament whose truth is founded on the principal Scriptures" (quoted in Horsch, Mennonites 223). Another group, under the leadership of Oswald Glait and Andreas Fischer, were Sabbatarians and attempted to work out ways of imposing Old Testament laws in the contemporary situation. On Glait, see Klassen, Covenant 105; on Fischer, see Liechty, Daniel: Andreas Fischer and the Sabbatarian Anabaptists (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), especially 55,60,87,91-3,104.

Testament. In the Old, it was of course to be written outwardly, but now in the New it is to be written on the fleshy tablets of the heart, as a comparison of the two Testaments shows"<sup>4</sup>. They assumed that a true interpretation could be arrived at by carefully comparing the Testaments, and regarding the New Testament as primary, rather than by attempting to impose a uniformity on Scripture that left Old Testament practices unaffected.

Similar views were expressed at the Bern Debate in 1538. While careful to acknowledge that the Old Testament continued to have value, its scope was curtailed by the conclusion that "we grant it validity wherever Christ has not suspended it and wherever it agrees with the New"<sup>5</sup>. Thus, although some room was left for continuity between the Testaments, they believed that in many areas the Old Testament had been "suspended".

Hubmaier, whose views on certain issues (such as the role of civil government and the use of force) were closer to the Reformers' views than most Anabaptists, might have been expected to place less emphasis on the discontinuity between the Testaments. There is, in fact, little in his writings that dealt directly with this issue, and he often quoted from the Old Testament. But, in several places, he exhibited the same concern as other Anabaptists that the New Testament should not be compromised by using the Old as if it were of equal authority. In his "Dialogue with Zwingli's Baptism Book" of 1526, he took Zwingli to task for ignoring the difference between the Testaments. He wrote: "For the sake of the last

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<sup>4</sup>Harder, Sources 289.

<sup>5</sup>AIO 150.



judgment, drop your circuitous argument on circumcision out of the Old Testament"<sup>6</sup>. Later he claimed, "We have a clear word for baptizing believers and you have none for baptizing your children, except that you groundlessly drag in several shadows from the Old Testament"<sup>7</sup>. In his "On Infant Baptism Against Oecolampad" of 1527, he expressed the same concern about illegitimate appeals to the Old Testament: "Water baptism is a ceremony of the New Testament. Therefore I demand from you a clear word out of the New Testament with which you bring to us this infant baptism ...But you prove infant baptism from Exodus"<sup>8</sup>.

Menno regarded Gellius Faber's approach as distorting Scripture. He appealed: "Behold, reader, how openly he falsifies the Scriptures and how mightily he perverts the truth when he writes that the command is unchanged; that in the gathering of the churches under the Old and New Testament one and the same, and not two different, commandments are given, both as to preaching and the use of the sacraments - when it is all changed and renewed"<sup>9</sup>. The Anabaptists were convinced that the teaching of the New Testament represented a radical change from that of the Old Testament, so that the two could not be regarded as equivalent.

Dirk Phillips taught as a basic hermeneutical requirement that "the true interpreter, therefore, must develop a hermeneutic which is conscious of the division between the two Testaments and can yet discover their underlying unity"<sup>10</sup>. This attempt to preserve the Bible's "underlying unity" was not unique to Phillips. However strongly the Anabaptists

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<sup>6</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 180.

<sup>7</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 182.

<sup>8</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 288.

<sup>9</sup>Menno, Works 685.

<sup>10</sup>Beachey, Grace 143.



emphasised the discontinuity between the Testaments, they did not regard this as challenging its essential unity as the Word of God<sup>11</sup>. But the primary focus was on the perceived discontinuity or "division" between the Testaments<sup>12</sup>.

Marpeck was the most radical of the Anabaptist leaders on this issue. His extensive writings will be explored below, but scholars agree that his approach was not far from the discontinuity pole. William Estep commented that, although "there is no question about Marpeck's allegiance to the Bible as the Word of God", yet for him "there was an absolute distinction between the Old Testament and the New"<sup>13</sup>. He noted Marpeck's characterisation of the Old Testament as the foundation of a house and the New Testament as the house itself, and his argument that foundation and house must be distinguished<sup>14</sup>. Although Estep did not pursue his analysis of this analogy further, it suggests that Marpeck agreed with Dirk Phillips in insisting upon discontinuity but in not discounting the importance of the Old Testament "foundation".

It is clear from the above quotations that "discontinuity" alone cannot be used to describe the Anabaptists' position on the two Testaments. They

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<sup>11</sup>Indeed, Myron Augsburger concluded that recognising the element of discontinuity was regarded as essential in order to preserve the integrity of Scripture. He wrote: "Anabaptist Mennonite theology, from its very beginning, saw a distinction between the Testaments. Not a distinction which questioned the 'grand unity' of the whole but one necessary if we are to see that unity": Augsburger, Principles 11.

<sup>12</sup>Keeney, Dutch 36.

<sup>13</sup>Estep, Anabaptist 142.

<sup>14</sup>Estep, Anabaptist 86.

taught both continuity and discontinuity. They were not arguing for the rejection of the Old Testament, nor for the complete divorce of the Testaments, but they were convinced that the New Testament was really and radically "new" and could not be seen as being in unbroken continuity with the Old. It was not that the New Testament revoked the Old and made it worthless, but rather that the Old was subsumed in the New and could not function in isolation from it. By contrast with the Reformers, however, the Anabaptists appeared to emphasise the element of discontinuity most strongly.

Treating the Testaments in this way had significant implications and led to major differences between Anabaptists and Reformers. Many state church practices were defended by the Reformers, as they were by Catholics, on the grounds that they were in line with Old Testament practices. Among these was infant baptism, difficult to establish on a New Testament basis, but defended by analogy with circumcision in the Old Testament<sup>15</sup>. But the Anabaptists challenged the validity of this application of an Old Testament ceremony to the church. They argued that, however appropriate circumcision may have been for the Jews, the New Testament introduced a radically new order in which a different ceremony - the baptism of believers - was appropriate<sup>16</sup>.

There were implications for ethics also. The views of the Church on many ethical issues had developed during the period of alliance between Church

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<sup>15</sup>Holland concluded that "all implications for the problem of baptism ultimately stem from the question of the relationship of the Old and New Testament": Holland, Hermeneutics 148. See also Potter, Zwingli 190.

<sup>16</sup>Steinmetz, Reformers 224.



and State, when many New Testament passages about issues such as war, oaths, and the sharing of wealth were set aside as inapplicable, or applied to a category of "special" Christians. Support was sought from Old Testament sources to justify the adoption of very different and much less radical stances on these issues. New Testament teaching was regarded as applying only to intentions or to the private life, or it was seen as applicable only to certain groups within society such as monastic orders. The Reformers had no place in their system for monks, nor would they apply what they considered a literalistic misreading of New Testament texts to the whole Church. Instead, they continued to subscribe to an ethic based on Old Testament norms<sup>17</sup>.

Anabaptists saw this as not only discounting the newness of the New Testament, but as in effect subordinating the New Testament to the Old. They argued with the Reformers not about how Old Testament ethics should be interpreted, but about whether this was the right place to look for ethical guidance. An anonymous Swiss Brethren booklet noted that the leaders of the state churches "have taken measures whereby force is used in matters of faith and conscience through a Mosaic manner of coercion", and complained that "this is contrary to their first teaching (a common Anabaptist complaint) and means that they have reversed themselves and gone back to Moses, that is from the light of the sun into the shadow"<sup>18</sup>.

David Steinmetz summarised their argument: "The moral standards of the New

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<sup>17</sup>Paul Tschackert, a Lutheran historian, acknowledged that Luther's approval of the bigamy of Philip of Hesse was based on a wrong conception of the relationship between the Testaments. See Horsch, Mennonites 224.

<sup>18</sup>Horsch, Mennonites 355.



Testament are higher than those of the Old, and any attempt to reinstitute the lower standards of the Old Testament destroys Christian freedom. Christians may not carry the sword simply because it was carried in the Old Testament"<sup>19</sup>. In many debates the Anabaptists objected to the Reformers' attempts to slip easily between the Testaments to support their arguments. They urged that the New Testament alone should be the basis for discussion. As Leonard Verduin remarked, "The Stepchildren [Anabaptists] complained loudly that the weapons which the reformers used...were weapons taken from the Old Testament arsenal. They looked upon the policy of sliding from the Old Testament to the New as a master evil, one from which all sorts of evils come"<sup>20</sup>.

### C. Old and New Covenants

The Anabaptist stance on the relationship between the Testaments was more subtle than some of their statements (and some discussions of their position) suggest. Although etymologically there is little difference between the concepts of "testament" and "covenant", with the same Greek work being translated by either term in Scripture, the Anabaptists distinguished between the two in order to explain their views. Some used the term "testament" to mean something different from the earlier or later sections of Scripture; others differentiated between "testaments" and "covenants".

Ulrich Stadler wrote:

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<sup>19</sup>Steinmetz, Reformers 224.

<sup>20</sup>Verduin, Reformers 210.

The Old Testament, written as it is in the letter, is no different from the New...Insofar as it remains a witness, and is heard, read or preached as such it is all the Old Testament, commandment, law or Word, whether it be Moses or the prophets, the evangelists or the apostles, Peter or Paul...On the other hand the New Testament is that according to which we live, which is planted in our hearts through the Spirit of God which is truly with us and with God. It is all called New Testament, the new commandment or the living Word of God, whether Moses or the prophets or the apostles have written it. It is called the New Testament if it lives in us and rules us, and if through it we are born again in mind and speech according to the will of God<sup>21</sup>.

Stadler used the terms "Old Testament" and "New Testament", but argued that equating these terms with the books which have traditionally been regarded as comprising the two Testaments was inadequate. The important thing was the content and the effect on its readers. Stadler's position was similar to Luther's opposition of letter and spirit. He was less interested in who wrote the texts and to whom they were addressed and more concerned about their function in the believer. Stadler was on the spiritualistic wing of Anabaptism and his chief anxiety was to avoid the trap of legalism. Not all Anabaptists would have subscribed to this rather subjective treatment of the Testaments. But it does act as a warning that the meaning of such seemingly obvious terms as "Old Testament" and "New Testament" cannot be taken for granted.

A less subjective example, but containing a similar argument, can be found in Rideman's writings:

Now all that is expressed in words, insofar as it is of the letter, whether it was written by Paul, Peter or any other from among the apostles, we call law and command, for so it is. For that letter, likewise, doth naught but kill, like the letter of the law of Moses. Insofar as it is spiritual,

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<sup>21</sup>AIO 146-7.



however, and treated and accepted spiritually, it is a word of grace, even though written by Moses<sup>22</sup>.

Rideman agreed with Stadler that the way a text was received affected its status - as law or grace. To the extent to which words of grace and spiritual significance could be discerned in Old Testament texts, to that extent they could be regarded as "New Testament" in the broader sense. Similarly, New Testament texts could become "Old Testament" in nature if they were misinterpreted as legalistic commands<sup>23</sup>.

The conclusion of Rideman's argument differed little from Stadler's, but he did focus on Christ as the one who made the difference between the old and the new, writing that "it is only the law insofar as it is summed up in writing, in the letter, which is done away with by Christ"<sup>24</sup>. This forged a rather closer link between literal and spiritual concepts of "New Testament".

This link is evident elsewhere in his writings, where he referred specifically to believers as "servants of the new covenant" who were not to participate in the practice of swearing oaths such as was appropriate in the "old covenant"<sup>25</sup>. That the New Testament forbade swearing whereas the Old encouraged it was reconciled on the grounds that what was appropriate under the old covenant was not under the new. Thus, the discontinuity between the Testaments was normally based on a similar

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<sup>22</sup>Rideman, Confession 66.

<sup>23</sup>This appears to be the inference from Denck's terse comment in "The Law of God" that "all commandments, customs and laws which are laid down in writing in either the Old Testament or the New are abrogated for a true student of Christ". See Furcha & Battles, Denck 66.

<sup>24</sup>Rideman, Confession 66.

<sup>25</sup>Rideman, Confession 115-6.



discontinuity between old and new covenants. However, he acknowledged situations where the spirit of the new covenant could be discerned in the Old Testament, and where the bondage to law of the old covenant could characterise the response to the New Testament.

A similar example from a lesser-known Anabaptist can be found in Jelis Bernaerts' letter to his wife in 1559. "Since you are a child of the New Testament...you are a partaker of the New Testament, and of all the glorious promises which are promised the children of the New Testament... now we have a better testament, which is for ever...we have a new testament given by Christ"<sup>26</sup>. Here the relationship between the New Testament and the "new testament" is more explicit. The New Testament was the authority for those to whom the "new testament" (in the sense of the new covenant) and its promises applied. The emphasis on the discontinuity between Old and New Testaments was a corollary of the emphasis upon the superiority of the new covenant introduced by Jesus Christ. To the extent that this new covenant reality was prefigured in the Old Testament, the Old Testament was still relevant, but the primary source of authority for new covenant believers was naturally the New Testament.

In Marpeck's writings, the relationship between the two covenants and the two Testaments was dealt with on several occasions. In his "Confession" he wrote:

The old covenant brought forth men into slavery through the fear of God, but without the future love of Christ. Their understanding of the testament of promise was quite childish, and, thus, as young children, they had to wait under the tutelage of the external ordinances...However, in the New Testament, by virtue of the Holy Spirit received

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<sup>26</sup>MM 625.

through Christ, there is a different reality. No one is born to servanthood; all are born as free adult children without fear, coercion, or tutelage as lords over all things<sup>27</sup>.

Ten years later in his "Admonition", he returned to this theme:

A great difference exists between Christians and Abraham's promise, a difference everyone, who can clearly understand the difference between the Old and New Testaments, can easily perceive...like most other things in the Old Testament, circumcision is a figure and image of the fact that God said to Abraham that He wanted to be his God and the God of his generation. From such a basis, the opposition argues that the Old and New Testaments are one. But one cannot extrapolate from this promise to Abraham that children are to be baptized...The old covenant is merely a covenant of promise<sup>28</sup>.

Marpeck insisted on a closer identification between covenants and Testaments than Stadler or Rideman, but his argument was not dissimilar. The basis for Marpeck's refusal to treat the two Testaments as one was his emphasis on the significant differences between the old and new covenants. Since the Old Testament basically dealt with life under the old covenant, it could not be applied literally to those now living under the new covenant; the discontinuity between the Testaments was a consequence of the difference between new and old covenants. In the second passage Marpeck seemed to leave open the possibility that some aspects of the Old Testament might still be applicable to new covenant believers, but his emphasis was firmly on the need to distinguish between the old and the new.

Thus, while Stadler and Rideman used the broader concept of "new testament" to temper their insistence on the discontinuity between the

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<sup>27</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 119.

<sup>28</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 223.



Testaments, Marpeck used the concept of the two covenants to undergird and explain his sharp distinction between the Testaments. Although his main concern was a dispensational one, he came close to identifying dispensations and Testaments.

Somewhere between these approaches fell that of Sattler, whose "On Two Kinds of Obedience" contrasted servile or legalistic obedience with filial obedience, and characterised the former as pertaining to Moses and the latter to Christ. He shared Marpeck's concern to distinguish between the old and new covenants, but made a less rigid identification of covenants with Testaments<sup>29</sup>. The conclusion of the debate at Zofingen in 1532 suggested a similar position had been reached. The statement read: "We say that the Old is the shadow, and that which is in unison with the words of Christ is light"<sup>30</sup>. The implication was that in general the Old Testament was subordinate to the New but that where it coincided with the teachings of Christ it was as authoritative as the New.

Without attempting to minimise the variety represented by the above passages, it is legitimate to conclude that the relationship between the two covenants was primary in the Anabaptists' thinking<sup>31</sup>, and that, on this basis, emphasis was placed on the discontinuity between the Testaments. For some, the almost total identification between old covenant and Old Testament meant that little from the Old Testament could be salvaged that was still applicable to new covenant Christians. For others, the

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<sup>29</sup>Yoder, Legacy 121-125; see also EBI 57, for comments on Marpeck, Sattler and Grebel.

<sup>30</sup>Horsch, Mennonites

<sup>31</sup>RR 832.



relationship was less exact and the spirit of the texts in both Testaments needed to be used to assess their applicability.

#### D. Origins

"The origins of Anabaptist originality on this point...have not yet been traced", wrote John Yoder of the emphasis on discontinuity between the Testaments<sup>32</sup>. Nevertheless, suggestions have been made which will be assessed in this section. Two possible sources have been indicated in the above discussion: the emphasis on the new covenant and its implications for the relationship between the Testaments; and the seemingly even more fundamental Christocentrism. It may be unnecessary to look far beyond these for the source of this "Anabaptist originality"<sup>33</sup>.

The Anabaptists themselves quoted certain New Testament texts which appeared to require discontinuity between the Testaments. Marpeck referred to Colossians 2:17 and Hebrews 9:16 as texts indicating that the New Testament should be preferred to the Old<sup>34</sup>. Paul's treatment of the relationship between the two Testaments in Galatians was also important for Marpeck<sup>35</sup>. For Menno, the statement in Hebrews 1:1 that God had now spoken decisively through Jesus convinced him that the New Testament must

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<sup>32</sup>EBI 28.

<sup>33</sup>Norman Kraus commented in relation to Christocentrism that "this is the obvious ground for making a distinction between the authority of the Old and New Testaments, which was a basic Anabaptist tenet": Kraus, God 60.

<sup>34</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 560. Hubmaier also referred to Colossians and Hebrews in this context: see Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 188.

<sup>35</sup>Estep, Anabaptist 142.

be placed above the Old<sup>36</sup>. The debate at Zofingen in 1532 referred to Matthew 20:5 (where Jesus told his disciples that whatever may be practised by others, "it shall not be so among you") as the biblical basis for their approach to the Testaments<sup>37</sup>. Another influential passage was the discussion in II Corinthians 3 about the new covenant and the distinction between letter and spirit<sup>38</sup>. But for many Anabaptists, the decisive passage was the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus repeatedly quoted the Old Testament and then said "But I say to you". On this basis they believed the Old Testament must be subordinated to the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament<sup>39</sup>.

However, the way in which these passages were used suggests that they were supports for existing convictions, rather than the source of these convictions<sup>40</sup>. Similarly, the argument that the Old Testament was given to Jews rather than to Christians, as well as being problematic in itself, seems a justification rather than an explanation of the Anabaptists' stance<sup>41</sup>. Other comments tended to fall within the scope of the above discussion on the two covenants (such as the subordinating of the Old Testament on the grounds that the hope of everlasting life was lacking

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<sup>36</sup>EBI 63.

<sup>37</sup>EBI 34. The reference to Matthew 20:5 is incorrect, but the point is clear.

<sup>38</sup>EBI 80.

<sup>39</sup>RR 832. Williams suggested that the book of Hebrews generally, with its emphasis on the superiority of Christ over Moses, encouraged the Anabaptists on this issue. See also, on Marpeck's use of Hebrews: EBI 104-5. On the importance of Hebrews to the Anabaptists generally, see Verduin, Reformers 210; EBI 33; Wenger, John: God's Word Written (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1966) 59; Estep, Anabaptist 142.

<sup>40</sup>But see EBI 33 for another perspective.

<sup>41</sup>Balke, Calvin 310.



there), rather than being substantive sources of this view.

Some external influences have been suggested as sources for this Anabaptist stance. William Klassen referred to the "considerable energy" that has been expended on this and dismissed as untenable the idea that Joachim da Fiore had any significant influence, at least as far as Marpeck was concerned<sup>42</sup>. Certain similarities between Joachim's views and those of the Anabaptists have been used by various scholars to establish their dependence on him in various areas, but these arguments do not carry great conviction.

Klassen himself suggested a rather surprising source, Augustine. He noted that Augustine's work "De Spiritu et littera" was popular in Zurich and Strasbourg and was influential among the Reformers. Although the Reformers did not make much of the radical distinction between the old and new covenants which Augustine taught, Klassen argued that the Anabaptists were impressed by his approach and adopted a similar stance which underlay their treatment of the two Testaments<sup>43</sup>. He did not, however, quote any examples of this, and it again seems likely that any support derived from Augustine was subsidiary to the main reasons for the adoption of the distinctive Anabaptist view on the Testaments.

A more probable external influence was Zwingli, to whom the Swiss Brethren were undoubtedly indebted in their view of Scripture. In the years before the Anabaptists separated from him, Zwingli stressed the primacy of the New Testament as the authority to which final appeal must be made<sup>44</sup>, an

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<sup>42</sup>EBI 92.

<sup>43</sup>EBI 80.

<sup>44</sup>Stephens, Theology 122.



emphasis of which the Brethren reminded him in later debates. Under the influence of their challenge on various issues, Zwingli appears to have moderated his views and argued that where the New Testament gave no clear guidance, analogies from the Old Testament should be used. But it is likely that his earlier stance had a marked influence on his radical disciples, who to his dismay insisted on pushing his treatment of Scripture to its logical conclusions<sup>45</sup>.

The suggestion of Zwingli's influence leads on to another explanation of the Anabaptists' views on the relationship between the Testaments, namely, that they were hammered out in debates with the Reformers, and resulted from the Anabaptists' dismay at how their opponents were using the Old Testament. Reference has already been made to the way in which the Reformers used Old Testament texts to reach conclusions that the Anabaptists saw as illegitimate. It would not be surprising if these experiences at least confirmed the Anabaptists in their conviction that the two Testaments must be treated as discontinuous, and it could even be that the source of their originality at this point was a thorough dissatisfaction with the implications of the alternative rather than positive reasons for their own approach.

Dirk Phillips expressed this dissatisfaction very clearly:

The false prophets cover and disguise their deceptive doctrines by appealing to the letter of the Old Testament consisting of shadows and types. For whatever they cannot

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<sup>45</sup>Potter, Zwingli 172-192. It has been calculated that Zwingli quoted from the New Testament five times as often as from the Old Testament: see Furcha, Edward J: Huldrych Zwingli Writings Vol I (Pennsylvania, Pickwick Publications, 1984) 12.

defend by the New Testament Scriptures, they try to establish by the Old Testament...from this fountain have flowed the sacreligious ceremonies and pomp of the church of Antichrist and the deplorable errors of the seditious sects<sup>46</sup>.

The "false prophets" were the Reformers and the "seditious sects" were the Münsterites and others who advocated violence. Dirk regarded both as abusers of the Old Testament, scouring it for excuses to avoid the clear teaching of the New Testament. His attribution of many practices he found abhorrent to an abuse of the Old Testament suggests that his practice of giving primacy to the New and refusing to allow the Old to dilute its demands was developed in reaction to the common practice of those he was opposing<sup>47</sup>.

Marpeck also regarded the failure to distinguish between the Testaments as a grievous error leading to dire consequences. He attributed to this not only the errors of the Münsterites but also the peasants' revolt and Zwingli's death in battle. He castigated Luther, Zwingli, the pope and the "false Anabaptists" alike for making this fundamental error<sup>48</sup>. In his "Admonition", Marpeck warned about the fruitlessness of preaching from both Testaments "in an indiscrete manner"<sup>49</sup>.

A similar dissatisfaction was evident in Marpeck's debate with Bucer and other Reformers in Strasbourg. Realising that his disagreements with the Reformers related to the views each side held of the relationship between

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<sup>46</sup>Phillips, Enchiridion 323.

<sup>47</sup>Menno also objected to such abuses. See Menno, Works 627-9 and the comments in Stayer, James: Anabaptists and the Sword (Lawrence: Coronado Press, 1973) 311.

<sup>48</sup>Estep, Anabaptist 142.

<sup>49</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 299.



the Testaments, Marpeck rejected his opponents' "continuity" position and emphasised the distinction between the Testaments. A careful reading of this debate suggests that both Bucer and Marpeck developed and clarified their own views in the light of the other's position. It is also apparent that both came to the debate with settled convictions on the main issues (such as believers' baptism) and developed a hermeneutic to support these convictions<sup>50</sup>. It is arguable that the very sharp distinction between the Testaments evident in Marpeck's writings might have been less pronounced without the polemical background against which it was developed<sup>51</sup>.

This exploration of the origins of the Anabaptists' insistence on the discontinuity between the Testaments has considered several possibilities, which are not mutually exclusive. The evidence of the Anabaptists' own writings seems to suggest that, however influential other factors may have been, the primary source of this insistence was their Christocentrism and their refusal to adopt any hermeneutic that might jeopardise the authority and normativeness of Jesus Christ. The sharpness of the distinction between the Testaments can be explained by their determination not to compromise this in the way they felt the Reformers were doing.

#### E. Distinctiveness

On some aspects of this issue, Reformers and Anabaptists agreed. Both believed the Old Testament was the Word of God and had prophetic

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<sup>50</sup>Steinmetz, Reformers 222ff; Dyck, Introduction 92ff.

<sup>51</sup>William Klassen wrote: "As he saw the way in which Bucer was led on his position on the Old Testament, Marpeck drove his stakes in deeper and clung to his position": EBI 91. See also Henry Poettcker: "Anabaptist-Mennonite Hermeneutics", in Dyck, Witness 365.



authority. Both accepted that many Old Testament ceremonies were not applicable to Christians<sup>52</sup>. Many of the Reformers acknowledged some discontinuity between the Testaments<sup>53</sup>. It is possible to find statements in Luther's writings that sound as radical as anything the Anabaptists might have written. In his 1525 tract "Against the Heavenly Prophets", for instance, he declares:

Moses is given to the Jewish people alone, and does not concern us Gentiles and Christians. We have our gospel and New Testament...Peter abrogates for the Christian the whole of Moses with all his laws. Yes, you say, that is perhaps true with respect to the ceremonial and the judicial law, that is, what Moses teaches about the external order of worship or of government. But the decalogue, that is, the Ten Commandments are not abrogated. I answer: I know very well that this is an old and common distinction, but it is not an intelligent one. For out of the Ten Commandments flow and depend all the other commandments and the whole of Moses<sup>54</sup>.

With this statement the Anabaptists would have been very comfortable, but as so often they were forced to conclude that the Reformers failed to apply their more radical comments. Luther remained strongly committed to the primacy of the gospel over the law, but he did not work through the implications of this for the way in which the Old Testament was used. Norman Kraus noted that Luther gave typological interpretations to much of the Old Testament in order to relate it to Christ, but he commented: "the more radical implications of this hermeneutical principle to which the Anabaptists called attention were overlooked by Luther...It was not merely a matter of adding the new to the old as a kind of climax and fulfillment

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<sup>52</sup>Stayer, Anabaptists 128; Wenger, Written 59.

<sup>53</sup>Keeney, Dutch 36; Baker, Two 50-2.

<sup>54</sup>Bergendoff, Conrad (ed): Luther's Works Vol 40 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958) 92-3.

but of fundamentally reinterpreting the prophetic tradition in light of its unexpected 'fulfillment'"<sup>55</sup>.

Other Reformers, to a greater or lesser extent influenced by the Anabaptists' challenge, were passionately committed to defending the unity and continuity of Scripture<sup>56</sup>. Zwingli and Bullinger strongly asserted the unity of Israel and the church as the one people of God and thus defended the integral unity and continuity of Scripture<sup>57</sup>. Bullinger marshalled an impressive array of arguments, supported by a plethora of texts, to support this position<sup>58</sup>. He failed to persuade the Anabaptists, however, that his methodology was anything more than a way of endorsing existing social ethics and church practices.

Bucer, too, taught that the Testaments formed an indivisible unity, with the Old Testament having practically the same authority for Christians as the New. Like the Anabaptists, he based his view of the relationship between the Testaments on the relationship between the two covenants. But unlike them, he regarded the new covenant as being essentially the same as the old. It was now understood better since the coming of Jesus, but it had not been essentially changed. Therefore there was no need to assume any great discontinuity between the Testaments<sup>59</sup>.

Willem Balke wrote that Calvin "constantly felt the need to defend the value of the Old Testament over against the Anabaptists"<sup>60</sup>. Calvin feared

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<sup>55</sup>Kraus, Jesus 84.

<sup>56</sup>George, Theology 274.

<sup>57</sup>Steinmetz, Reformers 220ff.

<sup>58</sup>RR 593.

<sup>59</sup>Dyck, Mennonite 92ff.

<sup>60</sup>Balke, Calvin 100.



that the Anabaptist stance devalued the spiritual character of the Old Testament and made an unnecessary distinction between the Testaments. But the Anabaptists were concerned that failing to make this distinction would lead to the New Testament being devalued.

Later Reformed theology developed the idea of a series of covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David in the Old Testament leading on to the new covenant in the New Testament, a concept not dissimilar to that suggested by the Anabaptists<sup>61</sup>. But in the early sixteenth century the Reformers were committed to there being but one covenant between God and humanity, and on this basis retained much of the Old Testament as a source of instruction on a wide range of issues. William Klassen concluded that "it was no accident that the Reformers retained [the Old Testament]; it was a logical result of their basic conservatism"<sup>62</sup>.

The Anabaptists, however, realised that failing to distinguish between the Testaments led to the justification of practices in church and society which they regarded as unchristian. They rejected the Reformers' attempts to justify compulsion in matters of faith, the practice of infant baptism, participation in warfare, and much else on the basis of Old Testament teaching. Their more radical approach to ethics and ecclesiology required them to interpret the Old Testament differently. Neither was at the extreme pole of continuity or discontinuity, but there was a substantial gap between the positions of the Reformers and the Anabaptists, a gap that both resulted from and resulted in their different conclusions on ethical and ecclesiological issues.

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<sup>61</sup>EBI 26.

<sup>62</sup>EBI 91.



## F. Anabaptists and the Old Testament

The Anabaptists' insistence on the primacy of the New Testament and discontinuity between the Testaments might imply that they had little interest in the Old Testament. That this was so in some groups is clear from certain statements. Felix Mantz quoted exclusively from the New Testament<sup>1</sup>. Schiemer advised, "when you read, read mostly in the New Testament and the Psalms...although it is good to read in the prophets and in the books of the kings and Moses it is not really necessary. One finds everything in the New Testament"<sup>2</sup>. An anonymous pamphlet from about 1530 is even stronger: "Since Christ has come, I am not allowed to hear Moses, who had only the sword of the law and not the sword of the Spirit, but we must listen to Christ"<sup>3</sup>. The conclusion of the Bern Colloquy, quoted above, is not much more positive, and there are statements from John Claess<sup>4</sup> and from Sattler<sup>5</sup> which seem so to focus on the New Testament as to discount the Old almost entirely.

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<sup>1</sup>See Krajewski, Ekkehard: "The Theology of Felix Manz" MQR XXXVI 78. Mantz was, however, one of the leading Hebrew scholars in Zurich. The paucity of his surviving writings mean that it is difficult to draw valid conclusions on this kind of issue. See also EBI 94.

<sup>2</sup>AIO 147. The devotional use of the Psalms was an exception to the Anabaptist emphasis upon the New Testament, but not one with much hermeneutical significance.

<sup>3</sup>Estep, William R: Anabaptist Beginnings 1523-1533 (Nieuwkoop: B De Graaf, 1976) 161.

<sup>4</sup>MM 469.

<sup>5</sup>"As I recently spoke with you in brotherly moderation and friendliness on certain points, which I together with my brothers and sisters have understood out of Scripture, namely out of the New Testament" (Sattler's letter to Bucer and Capito, quoted in Yoder, Legacy 21-2). Yoder commented: "The pre-eminence of the New Testament within Scripture is taken for granted."

Against this evidence of little regard for the Old Testament must be placed the considerable interest in it exhibited by other Anabaptist groups. A prominent example was the first German translation of the Old Testament prophets produced by Denck and Hatzer<sup>6</sup>. That some groups, such as the Munsterites and the followers of Oswald Glait, seemed to over-emphasize the Old Testament indicates that there was considerable variety of interest in this part of Scripture in the different branches of the movement.

Most Anabaptists defended themselves against the inevitable accusation that they were rejecting part of God's Word and insisted that they accepted the Old Testament as fully inspired and useful in various ways - although not in the ways it was being used by the Reformers or the Munsterites. They were clear that, despite their emphasis on discontinuity between the Testaments, this was to be understood within the framework of the essential unity of Scripture. Even Marpeck, who most strongly stressed discontinuity, saw his position as a corrective stance rather than being in total opposition to the Reformers' emphasis on the unity of Scripture<sup>7</sup>. The Anabaptists did not deny the authority of the Old Testament, nor did they ignore it. They saw the relationship between the Testaments as one of fulfilment rather than rejection<sup>8</sup>.

It appears from their writings that they used the Old Testament positively in several ways. First, it was used as a secondary source of authority

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<sup>6</sup>Klassen, Covenant 105.

<sup>7</sup>EBI 101.

<sup>8</sup>EBI 26; AIO 140.



when it was perceived to agree with the New Testament. Menno, for example, wrote that "the entire evangelical Scriptures teach us that the church of Christ was and is, in doctrine, life and worship, a people separated from the world...It was that also in the Old Testament"<sup>9</sup>. It has been calculated<sup>10</sup> that, in his writings, Menno quoted from the New Testament more than the Old at a ratio of three to one, but this still leaves a substantial body of references to the Old<sup>11</sup>.

Menno stated categorically<sup>12</sup> that both Testaments "were written for our instruction, admonition, and correction" and, somewhat surprisingly, concluded that "they are the true scepter and rule by which the Lord's kingdom, house, church and congregation must be ruled and governed". Clearly Menno would not have allowed the Old Testament to challenge the New in this, but his statement does indicate the real authority that was still accorded to the Old Testament even within the limits imposed by the emphasis on discontinuity. It is not just that the Old Testament was quoted, but that it was quoted as Scripture, even if it was not allowed to

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<sup>9</sup>Menno, Works 679.

<sup>10</sup>George, Theology 274. Keeney's figures were similar. He calculated that in five of Menno's major works he cited New Testament references two and a half times as often as Old Testament texts. Keeney also undertook a qualitative analysis (admittedly not exhaustive) which suggested that New Testament texts were generally used to establish doctrines and practices, Old Testament texts to support or illustrate these. New Testament texts were frequently quoted or paraphrased, but Old Testament citations were often merely listed: see Keeney, Dutch 38.

<sup>11</sup>Marpeck also used the Old Testament freely when he felt this was helpful. In some of his writings the ratio was as low as eight to one, but in others it was only three to two. See EB194 for further figures on Marpeck. For Dirk Phillips, Keeney calculated that his quotations were biased towards the New Testament at a ratio of five to one: see Keeney, Dutch 38.

<sup>12</sup>Menno, Works 159.



undermine the pre-eminence given to the New<sup>13</sup>.

Second, it was used devotionally as a source of encouragement, comfort and inspiration. Thus, Hubmaier wrote: "In this matter the Bible of the Old Testament will give us many stories for example and testimony"<sup>14</sup>. Menno, too, "made much of the devotional use of the Old Testament. From the characters on the historical stage Menno drew inspiration and challenge... Their examples of trust were to be followed"<sup>15</sup>. Both Martyrs' Mirror and the Anabaptist hymnbook, the Ausbund, drew heavily on Old Testament themes and narratives<sup>16</sup>. Anabaptists seem to have preferred the prophets and the Psalms, probably because of their greater amenability to devotional use, rather than the books of law or history, which had traditionally been used to support structures and practices with which the Anabaptists were unhappy.

Third, it was valued as vital preparation for the coming of Christ and the new covenant. The Anabaptists subordinated it to the New Testament, not because it had been rejected, but because it had been fulfilled. They did not accept contemporary evaluations of the Old Testament which reduced it

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<sup>13</sup>On Marpeck's use of the Old Testament as Scripture, see Klassen, Covenant 145.

<sup>14</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 506.

<sup>15</sup>EBI 70.

<sup>16</sup>EBI 94.

to the level of ancient history<sup>17</sup> or childish religion<sup>18</sup>, but regarded it as the foundation on which the New Testament "house" was built. It was important for Christians to read the record of God's dealings with his people in the past. Marpeck, in particular, emphasised the importance of the Law as preparation for the Gospel (agreeing at this point with Luther). This perspective led to his insistence both on the value of the Old Testament and on discontinuity between it and the New<sup>19</sup>. The Old Testament was regarded as useful to the Church precisely to the extent that its preliminary and preparatory character and function was recognised and respected<sup>20</sup>.

Fourth, the Old Testament was regarded as having continuing authority "outside the perfection of Christ", as a guide for the ordering of society. For Christians, living under the new covenant, the New Testament was the pre-eminent guide, but for those who were still living "in the world" and, in effect, under the old covenant, the Old Testament still had relevance<sup>21</sup>. The Reformers' unwillingness to draw this distinction between the Church and the world led them to attempt to apply Old

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<sup>17</sup>As Sebastian Franck did, removing its revelatory aspects: see EBI 70.

<sup>18</sup>This assessment derived from Marcion who regarded the Old Testament as suitable only for humanity in its childish state and not for those who have progressed further. Marpeck rejected this assessment and taught that in fact Christians return constantly to the Old Testament because it forms an integral and organic part (albeit a preparatory part) of God's dealings with humanity. See EBI 102.

<sup>19</sup>EBI 95-7.

<sup>20</sup>Steinmetz, Reformers 225; Estep, Anabaptist 144.

<sup>21</sup>Gish, New 58; Janzen, Waldemar: "A Canonical Rethinking of the Anabaptist-Mennonite New Testament Orientation", in Huebner, Harry: The Church as Theological Community (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1990) 90-1.



Testament principles and standards to the Church, and to argue that it was impractical to apply New Testament principles to society as a whole<sup>22</sup>.

The Anabaptists, in arguing for the pre-eminence of the New Testament within the Church, did not attempt to apply this to the whole of society. Here Old Testament standards and practices were understandable, if not ideal, in the absence of the work of the Holy Spirit in human hearts. This was how the Schleithem Confession dealt with the subjects of the sword and the oath, by giving a positive role to Old Testament teaching about these issues. This teaching was authoritative for Old Testament Israel and for their contemporaries who were "outside the perfection of Christ". But it was superceded by new standards "within the perfection of Christ"<sup>23</sup>.

Finally, it is worth exploring the methods the Anabaptists used to avoid adopting the Old Testament as normative in areas where they were convinced it had been superceded by the New. George Williams suggested that they "resorted to a variety of devices to assimilate the otherwise incongruent parts of the Old Testament"<sup>24</sup>, and that some of these devices were drawn eclectically from Catholic, Protestant, spiritualist and rationalist sources, with others being invented by the Anabaptists themselves.

The marked difference between their approach to the Old Testament and to the New was the lower importance given to the literal sense of the Old.

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<sup>22</sup>Verduin commented: "The Reformers sought to construe the New Testament church after the lineaments of the Old Testament, thus reversing the forward movement of God's affairs in history by an atavistic stroke which coincided with the Constantinian change": Verduin, Reformers 131.

<sup>23</sup>EBI 8, 26.

<sup>24</sup>RR 830.



Indeed, for some writers, the attempt to interpret the Old Testament literally was the source of much error and confusion. They did not deny the literal or historical sense of the Old Testament, but they used various dispensational schemes to avoid applying texts literally. The conclusions reached by Anabaptists in this area differed little from each other, but there was considerable variety in the terminology and concepts used to subordinate the Old Testament to the New.

The three writers who explored this most fully were Marpeck, Menno and Phillips. In his categorisation of Anabaptists into hermeneutical groupings, Beachey included all three within his "hermeneutics of the old and new covenants" subdivision<sup>25</sup>. That they shared this basic perspective on the relationship between the Testaments is clear from their writings, but their methods of achieving it were not uniform.

Dirk Phillips emphasised the need to discover the underlying unity of Scripture by "spiritually interpreting" the Old Testament in a way that ensured its subordination to the New<sup>26</sup>. He based his methodology on the distinction in the Epistle to the Hebrews between shadow and reality. The figures, characters, structures and practices in the Old Testament were to be understood as shadowy prefigurings of New Testament realities<sup>27</sup>. The task of the Old Testament interpreter was not to concentrate on the

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<sup>25</sup>Beachey, Grace 130-1.

<sup>26</sup>Beachey, Grace 143.

<sup>27</sup>Keeney, Dutch 36. Dirk wrote in his "Of Spiritual Restitution" in 1559: "All which we believe and confess is in the first place presented by many beautiful figures, and thereafter revealed, explained, testified and confirmed by the eternal Truth itself, that is, through Jesus Christ": Phillips, Enchiridion 363.

literal meaning of texts but to recognise the realities of the New Testament in shadow form in the Old. Dirk strenuously opposed those who failed to discern this priority and who attempted to apply the Old Testament literally in a way that threatened the superiority of the New<sup>28</sup>.

In his "Enchiridion", Dirk explained his practice:

For we are not to be pre-eminently guided by figures and types, or by the imperfections of the law (Heb 7:11), but by the perfect, true essentials and spirit of the gospel (Rom 6:14)...Nevertheless we do not mean herewith that we despise Moses with his figures and shadows, but behold them with spiritual eyes, yea, that we would discern and comprehend them according to the realities of the New Testament<sup>29</sup>.

In another passage<sup>30</sup>, he underlined this: "The scripture in many places speaks figuratively, and calls many things differently by letter than they are in spirit and real nature, and as they need to be understood." The contrast between this approach to the Old Testament and the focus on the literal meaning when dealing with the New Testament was very stark.

Dirk tried to regulate the use of allegory in interpreting the Old Testament, in reaction to the seemingly arbitrary methodology of Hoffman. Among his guidelines were: Old Testament events must act as a control - the supposed spiritual significance of a passage must not ignore or contradict the religious significance those events had for their own generation<sup>31</sup>; no substantive conclusions should be based on Old Testament allegories - they should be used merely to illustrate New Testament

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<sup>28</sup>See John Wenger: "The Biblicism of the Anabaptists", in Hersberger, Recovery 178.

<sup>29</sup>Phillips, Enchiridion 64.

<sup>30</sup>Phillips, Enchiridion 104.

<sup>31</sup>Keeney, Dutch 145.



teaching<sup>32</sup>; the Spirit's revelation was necessary for allegorising, rather than human imagination<sup>33</sup>; and the way New Testament authors treated the Old Testament was the standard, although some extension of what they had written was acceptable<sup>34</sup>.

Dirk has been criticised for his use of allegory and for failing to apply consistently his own principles. His sincerity and reverent approach have been acknowledged, however<sup>35</sup>, and he did indicate a way in which the Old Testament could be retained within a united Bible without applying it literally (in a "fleshy" manner, as Dirk called this) and falling into the errors he saw in the Münsterites and among the Reformers<sup>36</sup>.

Menno's approach relied much less on typology and allegorising. He subordinated the Old Testament to the New by accepting its teachings as valid for the time before Christ but as invalid for Christians, except where endorsed in the New Testament. In taking this approach, Menno retained the religious significance of Old Testament history that Dirk's method jeopardised<sup>37</sup>.

However, Menno made a similar distinction between the literal and

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<sup>32</sup>Phillips, Enchiridion 64.

<sup>33</sup>Phillips, Enchiridion 259.

<sup>34</sup>Phillips, Enchiridion 259.

<sup>35</sup>Dyck, Cornelius J: "The Christology of Dirk Phillips" MQR XXXI 152.

<sup>36</sup>See further on Phillips' hermeneutics: Shantz, Douglas H: "The Ecclesiological Focus of Dirk Philips' Hermeneutical Thought in 1559: A Contextual Study" MQR LX 115ff.

<sup>37</sup>Beachey, Grace 146-9. Henry Poettcker noted that Menno cautioned both Dirk Phillips and Gillis van Aken against using allegorical interpretation. See Poettcker: "Anabaptist-Mennonite Hermeneutics", in Dyck, Witness 365.



figurative meanings of the two Testaments. He complained: "It is intolerable that people apply the metaphors of the Old Testament to the truths of the New Testament in such a way as to confuse the figurative with the literal"<sup>38</sup>. Elsewhere he wrote in a similar vein: "Now we should not imagine that the figure of the Old Testament is so applied to the truth of the New Testament that flesh is understood as referring to flesh; for the figure must reflect the reality; the image, the being; and the letter, the Spirit"<sup>39</sup>. For Menno, literal adherence to Old Testament texts carried a connotation of disobedience, unlike the New Testament where the opposite was true<sup>40</sup>.

On the basis of this distinction, Menno could argue that different ethical standards applied to Christians than those that were operative in the Old Testament and which the Reformers appeared still to be defending as normative. He spiritualised the Old Testament, not by allegorising its contents but by attempting to discern the relationship between the literal and the spiritual in both Testaments<sup>41</sup>. That which was literal in the Old Testament needed to be translated into the spiritual realities of which the New Testament spoke<sup>42</sup>. The literal meaning of Old Testament texts was

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<sup>38</sup>Menno, Works 627.

<sup>39</sup>Menno, Works 42-3.

<sup>40</sup>EBI 74.

<sup>41</sup>Myron Augsburger wrote: "Menno expresses clearly that the unity of the Testaments is to be found in their spirit rather than their literal usage": Augsburger, Principles 25.

<sup>42</sup>For example, in countering the Munsterites' willingness to use the sword on the basis of Old Testament precedents, Menno argued that the physical sword should be left to Israelite soldiers and that Christians should rather wield the sword of the Spirit. See EBI 69.

not obliterated - they retained their contextual significance - but the interpreter needed to discover their New Testament equivalent, the fulfilment to which they pointed. The New Testament was to be interpreted literally, because it was the reality, the essence, the fulfilment. The Old Testament was to be interpreted spiritually because its literal sense, though still historically important, was inapplicable.

Marpeck's treatment of the Old Testament was similar to Menno's in that he had little room for allegory<sup>43</sup>, but he was even more radical than Menno in his relegation of everything in the Old Testament to the "grace of yesterday" as compared to the "grace of today" found in the New Testament. His approach certainly safeguarded the priority of the New Testament but made it harder to utilise the Old positively<sup>44</sup>. He used various pictures to explain the distinction between the Testaments: foundation and house<sup>45</sup>; transitory and eternal; symbol and essence<sup>46</sup>; slavery and sonship<sup>47</sup>; prediction (or promise) and fulfilment<sup>48</sup>; winter and summer<sup>49</sup>; figurative and actual<sup>50</sup>.

Nevertheless, Marpeck did make use of the Old Testament within the

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<sup>43</sup>William Klassen wrote: "Marpeck used allegory where he felt that the source material (like the Song of Solomon or the Hagar story) justified it, but showed such a keen interest in the historical books of the Old Testament that he hardly found any time at all for allegory": EBI 100-1.

<sup>44</sup>Beachey, Grace 150; Estep, "Ecumenical" 360.

<sup>45</sup>See Estep, Anabaptist 86.

<sup>46</sup>Estep, Anabaptist 142.

<sup>47</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 119.

<sup>48</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 223.

<sup>49</sup>Swartley, Willard: Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983) 141-2.

<sup>50</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 556.



framework of promise and fulfilment. The "grace of yesterday" may be inferior to the "grace of today", but it was a "first grace" and as such needed to be taught and received. He wrote that: "in the Old Testament it was all only fleshly, figurative, shadowy and temporal, but not actual. Nor did they have the spirit of divine promise which leads to eternal life. Nor did they have other actual things...for they were not then given but only promised"<sup>51</sup>. This distinction disallowed any attempt to apply Old Testament texts literally, but left open the use of the Old Testament to prepare the reader for an encounter with the gospel. It is arguable that Marpeck's view of the Old Testament was more positive than Luther's, in that whereas Luther saw it as Law, the purpose of which was to drive people in desperation to Christ for justification, Marpeck saw it as God's "first grace", a rather more affirming concept. It is, therefore, somewhat paradoxical that Luther insisted that the Old Testament's ethical norms be applied, but that Marpeck relegated these to the pre-Christian era. As with Dirk and Menno, Marpeck's concern was to find an appropriate framework within which the Old Testament could be safely used without being set alongside the New or allowed to evade the teaching of Jesus.

Other pictures used by Anabaptist writers to distinguish the Testaments include Schiemer's "shadow" and "light"<sup>52</sup>; Grebel's "outward" and "in the heart"<sup>53</sup>; Hubmaier's "old marriage" and "new marriage"<sup>54</sup>; and Rideman's "shade" and "light", and "bondage" and "sonship"<sup>55</sup>.

The dual goal of all these approaches and similes was to affirm that the

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<sup>51</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 556.

<sup>52</sup>RR 830.

<sup>53</sup>Harder, Sources 289.

<sup>54</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 454.

<sup>55</sup>Rideman, Confession 115-6.



Old Testament was of real but limited value. It was inspired Scripture, but it was not directly applicable to Christians in the way that the New Testament was. The symbols of the Old were not empty of significance, but their meaning must be understood by comparison with the realities of the New Testament to which they pointed. They must be neither discounted nor allowed to act as distractions. The underlying continuity between the Testaments was not disputed, provided sufficient attention was given to elements of discontinuity that required the division of Scripture into two Testaments.

### 1. Criticisms and Evaluation

The Anabaptist emphasis on discontinuity between the Testaments has been criticised as an unbalanced approach which tended to deprecate the Old Testament. Several points have emerged from the above discussion: the accusation that Anabaptists did not read or value the Old Testament; their supposed failure to appreciate the essential unity of Scripture; the use of allegorical interpretation to harmonise Old Testament texts with the New Testament. To these should be added a lack of recognition of the importance of the Old Testament as a necessary framework within which to read the New<sup>56</sup>, a framework that Jesus and the apostles used freely.

A term often used in connection with these criticisms is "Marcionite", a reference to the views of Marcion in the early church. Clearly Anabaptists held a position much closer to the pole of discontinuity than to its

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<sup>56</sup>EBI 154-5. In their concern to pattern themselves on the early church, the Anabaptists seem to have ignored the fact that the Old Testament was the early church's "Bible".

opposite, but the accusation of Marcionitism would locate them at the pole itself. Consideration of this issue tends to focus on Pilgram Marpeck, since he seems to emphasise the element of discontinuity as much as any within Anabaptism, although it is arguable that the Swiss Brethren took a similar view without setting out their approach as clearly as Marpeck<sup>57</sup>.

William Klassen examined Marpeck's hermeneutic and concluded that there were grounds to accuse him of being Marcionite in tendency. He admitted that Marpeck was guilty of overemphasising the difference between the Testaments, of not stressing sufficiently the revelatory aspect of the Old Testament, and of failing to note common features that linked them together<sup>58</sup>. He offered certain mitigating factors in Marpeck's defence: that Luther can also be accused of a Marcionite tendency; that Marpeck saw his approach as corrective, rather than maintaining the balance perfectly between the elements of continuity and discontinuity; that he disagreed with Marcion in his more positive evaluation and use of the Old Testament; that his concern was to ensure that nothing detracted from the glory of Christ; and that he "insisted that God's manner of dealing with man in history is determined by his sovereignty and not by man's progressive evolution"<sup>59</sup>. Willard Swartley, similarly, distinguished Marpeck's approach from that of Marcion: "The difference between the Testaments, therefore, must be attributed not to an essential change in God's moral will (contra Marcion) but to the essential historical difference between

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<sup>57</sup>Walter Klaassen defended the Swiss Brethren against the charge of Marcionitism in EBI 110.

<sup>58</sup>EBI 101. See also Klassen, Covenant 145. Holland makes a similar point with reference to Rideman: see Holland, Hermeneutics 80-1.

<sup>59</sup>EBI 102.



Old and New Testament times and places"<sup>60</sup>.

These scholars, writing from a sympathetic Mennonite perspective, appeared to endorse the approach of Marpeck and the Anabaptists in general to this issue, but to criticise it as unbalanced in certain respects. It seems doubtful, however, that ordinary Anabaptists appreciated the value of the Old Testament or made much use of it. Whatever the intention of leaders such as Marpeck, for most Anabaptists the Old Testament was disregarded and little used, as the references quoted earlier from Schiemer and John Claess in particular indicated<sup>61</sup>. A modern tendency among Mennonites to disregard the Old Testament was referred to by Mennonite Old Testament scholar, Millard Lind, as testimony to the somewhat unsatisfactory legacy left by Anabaptism on this issue<sup>62</sup>.

Criticism of the Anabaptists' use of allegorising in dealing with the Old Testament tends to focus on Dirk Phillips, who used this approach and suggested guidelines for its use, or on Hoffman, who used it in a less controlled manner. This issue has received scant attention, with most commentators dismissing it as an aberration or noting it as further evidence of the movement's unsophisticated hermeneutics. But it is arguable that Dirk's responsible allegorising offered an attractive alternative to the subjectivity of the Spiritualists and the objectivity

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<sup>60</sup>Swartley, Slavery 141.

<sup>61</sup>See above at p165.

<sup>62</sup>EBI 154. Elsewhere, however, he wrote "I am not sure that the early Anabaptists were as negative to the Old Testament as have been some Mennonites of the past generation", suggesting that the weakness was within Mennonite interpretation of the Anabaptists' stance rather than in that stance itself. See Lind, Millard: Monotheism, Power, Justice (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1990) 14.



of the Reformers. It is possible that he preserved certain positive features of medieval hermeneutics that most of the Reformers jettisoned unnecessarily<sup>63</sup>.

There are, after all, New Testament precedents for allegorising the Old Testament. The triumph of the "literal sense" and the development of the historical-critical method may have marginalised such methods, and the unhelpful results of uncontrolled allegorising may have led to its abandonment by many, but it is possible that a responsible use of this methodology might be a fruitful *via media*. The Anabaptists' allegorising must be understood in the context of their reliance on the Holy Spirit. They believed the Author of Scripture could make clear to the simplest believer His intention. Often this was equated with the plain meaning of the texts, but sometimes there might be deeper meanings that the Spirit would reveal. They were not advocating allegorising based on intellect or imagination, but on listening to the voice of the Spirit. At least this feature of Anabaptist hermeneutics suggests that they were not just unsophisticated literalists. It may be that their practice also has contemporary significance<sup>64</sup>.

Another way of evaluating the Anabaptists' approach is to contrast it with the Reformers' approach and to ask if a third alternative might exist, which is preferable to either of these sixteenth century solutions. A major influence on the development of this Anabaptist perspective was their experience of being assaulted by the Reformers with a battery of Old Testament texts to destroy their position on ethical and ecclesiological

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<sup>63</sup>Rutschman, in Schipani, Freedom 59; RR 830; EBI 58.

<sup>64</sup>See below at pp389ff.

topics. Two responses were open to them: to argue that the Old Testament was not authoritative in these matters, or to show that the Reformers were misinterpreting it. The Anabaptists seemed unable or unwilling to adopt the latter course, and as a result opted for the former approach, which inevitably downgraded the Old Testament<sup>65</sup>.

It is arguable that neither the Reformers nor the Anabaptists succeeded in handling the Old Testament adequately. Luther's yardstick of "whatever promotes Christ" sounds good but leaves most hermeneutical questions unanswered. The insistence of other Reformers on the unity of Scripture and the importance of treating the Old Testament seriously was compromised by their failure to distinguish between Church and society and their tendency to argue for many practices on the basis of Old Testament texts in a way which seemed to marginalise the teaching and example of Jesus. The Anabaptists challenged this, but in the process came close to jettisoning the Old Testament as a source of authority within their churches<sup>66</sup>.

As a strategy to defend their convictions and to provide their members with a coherent approach to Scripture in the face of persistent challenges, the Anabaptist position was successful<sup>67</sup>. It is arguable that adopting such an approach was preferable to accepting the Reformers' uses

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<sup>65</sup>EBI 57-8; Janzen: "A Canonical Rethinking of the Anabaptist-Mennonite New Testament Orientation", in Huebner, Church 92-3.

<sup>66</sup>Janzen: "A Canonical Rethinking of the Anabaptist-Mennonite New Testament Orientation", in Huebner, Church 103

<sup>67</sup>Ben Ollenburger concluded: "It was a tactic which was necessary, which worked, and which they could justify": EBI 59.



of the Old Testament. But this does not mean that this is a position which should be defended uncritically or be allowed to hinder the development of a more satisfactory treatment of the relationship between the Testaments which, far from overturning the Anabaptists' convictions, might provide a more secure basis upon which they can be established.

Alvin Beachey concluded his assessment of Dirk Phillips' position with the comment that "granted the historical situation...Dirk's hermeneutical method was an effective protest. In the absence of the context of the historical situation in which it arose the method becomes questionable"<sup>68</sup>. Regarding the Anabaptist position on this issue as an "effective protest" is possibly the most helpful assessment. This protest has borne fruit in that many of their convictions, defended on the basis of discontinuity between the Testaments, are now widely accepted whereas those espoused by the Reformers are considered less helpful in the contemporary situation<sup>69</sup>.

It is possible, therefore, to express dissatisfaction with the Anabaptists' methodology at this point but to value their legacy insofar as it challenges alternative methods which may compromise the centrality of Jesus and the radical newness of the new covenant. Their concerns can be accepted as valid even if their attempts to protect these are judged inadequate. The task of contemporary interpreters is to develop a methodology for interpreting the Old Testament that is faithful to the important Anabaptist perspectives on ecclesiology and ethics but that

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<sup>68</sup>Beachey, Grace 146.

<sup>69</sup>In particular, such issues as the concept of the believers' church, the relationship between Church and State, and the refusal to use force to compel belief.



values the Old Testament and is consistent with the essential unity between the Testaments, which the Anabaptists themselves strove, but to some extent failed, to maintain.

Finally, it is worth noting that the Anabaptists drew on several significant New Testament texts to defend their position on the relationship between the Testaments. Although their attempt to correct what they regarded as an unbalanced position on this issue may itself be flawed, they did have biblical support for their emphasis on discontinuity. These texts need to be given due weight if interpreters, in their concern to find a system that rescues the Old Testament from disuse, are not to move too far towards the pole of continuity and thus fall into the trap of undervaluing the newness of the new covenant about which the Anabaptists felt so strongly<sup>70</sup>.

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<sup>70</sup>William Klassen wrote about Marpeck's hermeneutics: "Before his position is brushed aside it would be necessary to take into consideration the attitude taken by the writer to the Hebrews on this very important question. Perhaps modern "Biblical theologians" might have as much difficulty fitting Hebrews into their scheme of things as they would Marpeck": EBI 105. And Leonard Verduin concluded: "One can go very far indeed in saying that there is discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament before one lands in error as great as the man who refuses to accept the discontinuity that the New Testament plainly teaches": Verduin, Reformers 210.

A. Introduction

The relationship between Spirit and Word was one of the major hermeneutical issues of the Reformation<sup>1</sup>. The Anabaptists were not alone in struggling to find a balanced position which gave sufficient room for the Holy Spirit to be actively involved in the process of interpretation whilst safeguarding the normative authority of Scripture. They were charged with erring in both directions, and accused of both literalism and spiritualism. The first part of this section will assess the implications of this double charge.

On the basis of this assessment, the Anabaptists' views can be located among the various positions on the continuum between the poles represented by "Spirit" and "Word", which characterised sixteenth century hermeneutics. To do this, the considerable range of views expressed by different Anabaptists will need to be examined, and some attention given to the views of Reformers and Spiritualists.

The Anabaptists' emphasis on the Holy Spirit in interpreting Scripture must be understood against the background of their pneumatology and experience - individually and corporately - of the Spirit's activity. This issue has been treated circumspectly by most Mennonite commentators, who have tended to play down or regard as marginal charismatic elements within Anabaptism. It will be important to re-examine the sources to assess the legitimacy of this treatment.

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<sup>1</sup>Klassen, Covenant 104.

## B. Literalists or Spiritualists ?

That Anabaptists were accused by their contemporaries of both literalism and spiritualism - and that these charges have both been repeated by later scholars - indicates that the issue of Spirit and Word was complex in the Reformation period. There are several possible interpretations of this apparently contradictory double charge. First, that neither are accurate and that the fact that Anabaptists were accused of imbalance on both sides suggests they had the balance roughly right. Second, that one is true and the other false, based on a misunderstanding of their position. Third, that both are true but of different Anabaptists, so that the charges indicate the variety of views within Anabaptism on this issue. Fourth, that both are true simultaneously, so that the same Anabaptist groups were guilty of excesses on both sides of this issue. Fifth, that these accusations reveal at least as much about those making them as about the Anabaptists, so that it is important to know who was making the accusation before assessing its accuracy.

The evidence supports a combination of these interpretations. Accusations of literalism were used by many different people in the sixteenth century and with various meanings. Spiritualists, like Schwenckfeld and Franck<sup>2</sup>, used it to express their concern that the Anabaptists were so interested in the letter of Scripture that they were quenching the Spirit and missing Scripture's deeper, spiritual significance. It was used also in a similar, though less damning, way by some Anabaptists themselves, such as Denck, Kautz, Hut and Bänderlin, leaders of the South German Anabaptists, about

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<sup>2</sup>EBI 82-84.



those brothers they felt were overemphasising the letter of Scripture<sup>3</sup>.

The Swiss Brethren, particularly, were criticised on this point by several Anabaptist leaders, including Hubmaier<sup>4</sup> and Marpeck<sup>5</sup>. The concern was that such literalism resulted in legalism and formalism.

It was used, thirdly, by the Reformers with reference to the Anabaptists' commitment to the plain sense of Scripture and the principle of *scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. The Reformers labelled "literalistic" the Anabaptist conviction that Scripture was clear and open to interpretation by ordinary believers<sup>6</sup>. Finally, the Reformers also used it to criticise the Anabaptists for focusing exclusively on the "literal sense" of Scripture rather than on its spiritual or allegorical senses<sup>7</sup>. That this term was employed by the Reformers in this pejorative way when they themselves were known to be committed to the primacy of the literal sense further illustrates a common feature of the debate between them and the Anabaptists. Anabaptists were again under attack for applying a Reformation principle in ways the Reformers found unacceptable.

As for the charge of spiritualism, this was the Swiss Brethren's reply to those who accused them of over-emphasising the letter of Scripture. They

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<sup>3</sup>EBI 82.

<sup>4</sup>Although Packull suggests that Hubmaier's concern was not so much with their literalism as with their tendency, in his view, to overemphasise certain parts of Scripture to the detriment of the whole: see Packull, Mysticism 104.

<sup>5</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 303, 359.

<sup>6</sup>See above at pp64ff.

<sup>7</sup>Fritz Blanke referred to the disagreement between Zwingli, who differentiated between the innermost teaching of Scripture which remained binding and the outward teaching which did not, and Grebel for whom this distinction was invalid: Blanke, Brothers 15; see also Ruth, Grebel 128.

feared that their critics risked straying from the actual texts of Scripture and relying on a spiritual meaning which was subjective and detached from the words of Scripture<sup>8</sup>. The Reformers also made this accusation in two contexts: with regard to the Anabaptists' disregard for scholarship<sup>9</sup>, and in relation to the Anabaptists' use of allegory, which was regarded as illegitimate and dangerous.

An example of the first concern is the Nuremburg council's criticism of Hans Hut in 1527, accusing him of relying on dreams, visions and inspiration rather than on the Bible<sup>10</sup>. Calvin, who had most decisively among the Reformers rejected all allegorical usages, was the most outspoken critic of the Anabaptists on the issue of allegorising.

Referring to the Schleithem Articles, he complained about the Anabaptists allegorising "perfectly clear and plain promises" of Scripture<sup>11</sup>; and, in "Against the Anabaptists", he wrote: "I am quite familiar with the ruse that the Anabaptists invent here, taking allegorically the name 'children' ...they mock us for being so simple as to take this reference literally. But what subtlety is it, I ask you, to want to turn upside down these perfectly clear and plain promises"<sup>12</sup>.

Later scholars have echoed these criticisms in a similar variety of ways. Willem Balke concluded: "The Anabaptists spiritualistically undervalued

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<sup>8</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck p322; Weaver, Becoming 63.

<sup>9</sup>Oyer, Lutheran 145ff; 214ff.

<sup>10</sup>RR 177. See also RR 194, 201; Clasen, Anabaptism 316ff.

<sup>11</sup>Farley, Calvin 29.

<sup>12</sup>Farley, Calvin 51-2; see also Balke, Calvin 314.



the culture and scholarship of their day"<sup>13</sup>. Cornelius Dyck suggested that the Anabaptists' reliance on the Holy Spirit was usually ignored by critics of their literalistic tendency<sup>14</sup>. George Potter described the whole movement as "spiritualists" and "the 'spiritual' movement"<sup>15</sup>. Walter Klaassen wrote that the "rejection of the distinction between primary and secondary matters created a real hazard of literalism and legalism"<sup>16</sup>. But he also commented that "they often spoke, almost naively, about being led by the Spirit, and being given divine illumination"<sup>17</sup>. Cornelis Augustijn considered that Menno "exhibited a certain amount of 'stuffiness' due to his handling of the Bible as a rulebook, so that the appeal to freedom was in danger of floundering in a new legalism"<sup>18</sup>. John Oyer's examination of Rinck's interpretation of texts on marriage concluded that "one senses here not only literalism but also legalism"<sup>19</sup>. Later Oyer noted that ordinary Anabaptists, when confronted by biblical scholars or awkward verses, retreated to a reliance on the Spirit<sup>20</sup>; and in another section he concluded that Central German Anabaptists "insisted on putting both a more spiritualistic and at the same time a more literalistic construction on [the principle of sola scriptura] than the Reformers did"<sup>21</sup>.

To resolve these charges and counter-charges into a coherent picture, several points should be noted. First, the Lutheran Reformers (Luther, Menius and Melanchthon) tended to identify Anabaptists with Thomas

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<sup>13</sup>Balke, Calvin 207.

<sup>14</sup>EBI 35.

<sup>15</sup>Potter, Zwingli 168-9.

<sup>16</sup>Klaassen, Neither 32.

<sup>17</sup>AIO 72.

<sup>18</sup>Augustijn, "Anabaptism" 210.

<sup>19</sup>Oyer, Lutheran 87.

<sup>20</sup>Oyer, Lutheran 164-5.

<sup>21</sup>Oyer, Lutheran 89.



Müntzer and label them indiscriminately as Schwarmerei. This was due to ignorance on the part of Luther and Melanchthon and to polemical reasons on the part of Menius<sup>22</sup>. By definition, therefore, Anabaptism was associated with enthusiasm and subjectivity, and its counterbalancing tendency to literalism was overlooked. It is unlikely that a fair picture of Anabaptist views on this issue can be drawn from these sources.

Second, there were significant differences between Anabaptist groups and also between the movement's first and second generations. Accusations of literalism generally focus on the Swiss Brethren and the early years of the movement<sup>23</sup>. Those concerned with spiritualism usually focus on German Anabaptists and later developments<sup>24</sup>. Attempts to label the whole Anabaptist movement as either literalistic or spiritualistic fail to reflect its diversity<sup>25</sup>.

Third, Anabaptist statements used as a basis for these criticisms have not always been read in context. Anabaptist leaders were fighting on two fronts - against Reformers and Spiritualists. In their debates with the former they often emphasised the Spirit, whereas in their debates with the latter they concentrated on the Word<sup>26</sup>. If these contexts had been appreciated, some assessments of Anabaptist views might have been more

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<sup>22</sup>Oyer, Lutheran 195ff, 248.

<sup>23</sup>Estep, Beginnings 21, 33-5.

<sup>24</sup>AIO 72; RR 177. But cf Clasen, Anabaptism 140; Friedmann, Theology 19-20.

<sup>25</sup>As John Yoder tersely noted, "not all the critics were speaking of the same Anabaptists": EBI 18.

<sup>26</sup>William Keeney commented that Dutch Anabaptists "used the Scriptures as a two-edged sword for combatting their opponents on both the left and the right": Keeney, Dutch 34-5.

balanced.

Fourth, there was a marked difference between the Anabaptists' approach to the Old Testament and their treatment of the New. The double charge of literalism and spiritualism may partly be explained by the dichotomy here. Their Christocentrism, and the consequent primacy they gave to the New Testament, resulted in a deep concern to be ruled by the New Testament. Their corresponding concern not to allow the Old Testament to detract from the New, and their uncertainty about how to achieve this without producing contradictions if they interpreted the Old Testament literally, led to the adoption of a spiritualising approach in the interests of harmonising the Testaments.

Fifth, understandings of the relation between Word and Spirit were fluctuating throughout this period, and it was tempting to label opponents "literalists" or "spiritualists" (or both) in order to discredit their interpretations. The fact that Reformers and Anabaptists both accused each other of literalism and of failing to take texts of Scripture literally is explicable in part as a polemical device rather than reasoned criticism.

Sixth, accusations of spiritualism sometimes related not to hermeneutics or to whether the literal or spiritual sense of certain texts was to be sought, but to spiritualistic practices. There were "revivalist" features in many Anabaptist groups, including the use of charismatic gifts and the expectation of revelation through visions and prophetic utterances<sup>27</sup>. That such spiritualism could be closely allied to a literalistic approach to Scripture is supported by comparison with some modern Pentecostal and

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<sup>27</sup>See below at pp198-200.



charismatic movements. This may help to explain why some groups were accused of being simultaneously prone to both literalism and spiritualism.

Seventh, many scholars have worried more about spiritualistic excesses than literalistic imbalance. They have been willing to accept a degree of literalism in early Anabaptism, but have dismissed spiritualistic features as characterising only fringe groups or individuals<sup>28</sup>. In groups descended from the Anabaptists the literalistic element clearly predominated, but it is illegitimate to read this predominance back into the movement's early years<sup>29</sup>. This negative attitude towards spiritualistic practices in early Anabaptism has resulted in a marginalising of those involved, and a readiness to agree with those who criticised these practices. There has not been a careful assessment of early Anabaptist practice to discover if, in fact, their predecessors might have made a distinctive contribution to hermeneutics that found a middle way between the Reformers and the Spiritualists and gave proper weight to both Spirit and Word.

Evaluation of the Anabaptists' approach to this issue will be left until the final part of this section, after examining their writings on the issue of Spirit and Word, rather than the accusations of their critics; but it seems that the various criticisms of the Anabaptists as spiritualists and literalists, when understood against the confused background of Reformation discussions on this issue, indicate a fluid hermeneutical practice within Anabaptism. Some inclined towards a literalistic approach in order to be faithful to the commands of Christ. Others relied more on

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<sup>28</sup>EBI 82.

<sup>29</sup>See further on this below at pp198ff.



the Holy Spirit to communicate the essential truth of God's revelation. In certain groups these two tendencies were held in tension or perhaps used without any attempt to harmonise them. In some there may have been a recognition, albeit not fully worked through, that reliance on the Spirit and adherence to the letter of Scripture were not contradictory but complementary<sup>30</sup>. Whatever the explanation, Anabaptist statements need to be set in their context, and due allowance made for their purpose, which was often to correct some perceived imbalance on either the literalistic or spiritualistic side.

If an attempt is to be made to locate the Anabaptists on the sixteenth century theological continuum, this can only be done by recognising the diversity among them. Any placement must be quite tentative. No Anabaptist was as near the "Spirit" pole as the Spiritualists<sup>31</sup>. Even those, like Denck, Hut and Kautz, whose statements sometimes seemed to disparage the letter of Scripture, were avid Bible students who in practice did not disconnect Spirit and Word<sup>32</sup>. Few, if any, of the Reformers were as near the "Word" pole as Mantz, Grebel and other early Swiss Brethren - although these men claimed that their inspiration was Zwingli and that they were merely applying his principles consistently. In general, it is reasonable

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<sup>30</sup>This will be explored below at p205. See also EBI 18-20.

<sup>31</sup>Davis: "Anabaptism and Ascetic Holiness", in Stayer & Packull, Anabaptists 59. Those who did move over this far, such as Obbe Philips, detached themselves from Anabaptism and became identified with the Spiritualists. Clearly the boundary line between these two groups was not totally distinct, but submission to believers' baptism and obedience to New Testament commands tended to mark off the spiritualistic wing of Anabaptism from the Spiritualists.

<sup>32</sup>EBI 32.

to place the Anabaptists, with the exception of the early Zürich group, in a mediating position between the Reformers and the Spiritualists. But on certain issues, such as the relationship between the Testaments, the relative positions of Reformers and Anabaptists have to be reversed; and individuals in both camps tended further towards each pole than their colleagues<sup>33</sup>.

Among Anabaptists, Mantz and Grebel (and most of the early Zürich group) should be placed on the literalist edge; Hut, Denck, Kautz and Bunderlin (and many of the South and Central German groups), on the spiritualist edge. Among the Swiss, Hubmaier and Sattler<sup>34</sup> both displayed a more moderate approach than their Zürich colleagues. The centre ground was probably held by the Dutch leaders, Menno Simons and Dirk Phillips<sup>35</sup>, and by the German groups associated with Marpeck and Scharnshlager. Marpeck, especially, in debates with Schwenckfeld, with Bucer and Capito, and with the Swiss Brethren, attempted to find a balanced position which avoided the extremes he saw on both sides<sup>36</sup>.

This tentative morphology of the movement is adequate for the purposes of

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<sup>33</sup>It may be questioned, in the light of these qualifications, whether the concept of the Word/Spirit continuum is worth retaining. However, the Word and Spirit poles do seem to have been clearly, if not justifiably, identified in the sixteenth century. The analysis by reference to a continuum is based on this sixteenth century perception; but it may not be the best way of delineating the various positions on a range of issues.

<sup>34</sup>On Sattler, see Snyder, Sattler 164.

<sup>35</sup>Keeney, Dutch 34-5.

<sup>36</sup>William Klassen graphically described Marpeck's goal as being "to avoid the Charybdis of spiritualism in which the authority of the word is lost, and also to avoid the Scylla of arid biblicism, which makes the New Testament an enslaving letter": Klassen, Covenant 60.



this study. The Anabaptists' emphasis on the Spirit's work in interpreting Scripture needs now to be set in the context of their general pneumatology and their individual and corporate experience of the Holy Spirit.

### Anabaptist Pneumatology

"Those who do not feel in themselves a power about which they have to say that things that were once impossible are now possible are not yet born again of water and spirit, even the Holy Spirit"<sup>37</sup>. Leonhard Schiemer's words convey something of the Anabaptists' enthusiasm and expectancy and also indicate two distinctive emphases in its theology: the preference for the term "born again" rather than "justification by faith"; and a focus on the experience of new life and power to live differently rather than on freedom from guilt and assurance of forgiveness, as in Luther.

The preference for new birth terminology was evident throughout the movement. The Anabaptists accepted "justification by faith" without demur but did not find this term adequate to describe their experience of Christ and his Spirit<sup>38</sup>. They were orthodox in believing that through the death of Christ their sinful past had been forgiven, but their interest was in living a Christ-centred life in the power of the Spirit. The Reformers spoke about the Spirit's work and encouraged sanctification, but the Anabaptists found much of what they said cold and lifeless, theoretical rather than experiential. For them, the Holy Spirit was a living reality, in their personal experience and in the activities of their congregations.

Several commentators have noted this distinctive feature of early Anabap-

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<sup>37</sup>AIO 75.

<sup>38</sup>Friedmann, Theology 87.



tism and have assembled evidence from various Anabaptist leaders that shows the difference between their emphasis and that of the leading Reformers<sup>39</sup>. Some have suggested the Swiss Brethren were an exception<sup>40</sup>, but there is ample evidence that among the earliest Swiss congregations there was an experience of the Spirit similar to that generally associated with South German groups<sup>41</sup>.

The significant place of the Spirit in the Anabaptists' thinking and experience can be illustrated from their writings. Alan Kreider's research in Martyrs' Mirror has shown that common Anabaptist terms for salvation were all related to the work of the Spirit and the expectation of a changed life. He listed the following as occurring frequently: new birth; conversion; illumination; enlightenment; the new creature; and regeneration which is performed by the Spirit of God<sup>42</sup>.

Menno consistently used "new birth" to describe the start of the Christian life. His commitment to the authority of Scripture was balanced by an emphasis on the Spirit's work, to which Scripture witnessed and through

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<sup>39</sup>AIO 72; Clasen, Anabaptism 121; George, Theology 265-6; Estep, "Ecumenical" 360; Bergsten, Hubmaier 353-4; Oyer, Lutheran 85; Snyder, Sattler 168.

<sup>40</sup>Stayer, Anabaptists 136.

<sup>41</sup>Walter Klaassen described events in Zollikon and concluded: "when we seek a caption for the inner processes of these eight days, the concept 'revival movement' presents itself": Klaassen, Neither 32. Claus-Peter Clasen, describing the same events, compared them with the early history of twentieth century Pentecostalism: Clasen, Anabaptism 121ff. See also Davis: "Anabaptism and Ascetic Holiness", in Lienhard, Origins 37, 41.

<sup>42</sup>Kreider, Alan: "The Servant is not Greater than his Master: Anabaptists and the Suffering Church" MQR LVIII 12.

which alone it could be understood<sup>43</sup>. Hubmaier's confession of faith at Nicosburg put faith in the Holy Spirit in first place - contrary to normal practice - and spoke of the Spirit's work as providing both enabling grace and motivating power in the Christian's new life<sup>44</sup>. In Dirk Phillips' writings, likewise, the Spirit had a vital role: as the agent of regeneration; the one who wrote the new covenant on the hearts of believers; the one who enabled believers to participate in the divine nature; the earthly presence and power of Jesus; the vital empowering for ministers called by God; and the interpreter of Scripture<sup>45</sup>. And for Melchior Rinck, baptism was associated with an outpouring of the Spirit that enabled the believer to live a new life<sup>46</sup>.

Sattler rejected the Augustinian idea that grace and election were known to God alone, arguing that there must be visible evidence of this<sup>47</sup>.

Marpeck, too, expressed his concern that much of Christendom had only a nominal faith<sup>48</sup>. Denck rejected what he perceived as the Lutheran advocacy of a creedal faith, which merely gave mental assent to certain dogmatic propositions. He insisted that "true faith was existentially born when the internal Christ was born in the heart"<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup>EBI 71-2.

<sup>44</sup>Beachey, Grace 153.

<sup>45</sup>Beachey, Grace 58. It is clear from Dirk's writings that the role he ascribed to the Spirit in interpreting Scripture followed naturally from the role the Spirit was seen to play in the whole life of the Christian and the Church.

<sup>46</sup>Oyer, Lutheran 77ff.

<sup>47</sup>Snyder, Sattler 177.

<sup>48</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 127. Concluding his study of Hut, Hubmaier, Hoffman and Marpeck, Armour wrote: "The Anabaptist doctrine of regeneration is 'inner transformation and renewal': Armour, Baptism 119.

<sup>49</sup>Packull, Mysticism 54.



Even the Swiss Brethren emphasised the Spirit's work of empowering believers to live new lives. James Stayer suggested the Swiss followed normative Protestant ideas about what he called "passive justification" (whereas the South Germans emphasised spiritualism)<sup>50</sup>, but this seems an exaggerated distinction in the light of the evidence of the spiritualistic fervour around Zürich<sup>51</sup>. Robert Friedmann concluded that, for all Anabaptists, forensic ideas of grace were "outside their terms of reference", and noted that one of the founders of the Swiss group, Georg Blaurock, interpreted grace as "the inner light that directed a life of righteousness"<sup>52</sup>.

Ordinary Anabaptists, too, under interrogation, frequently expressed dissatisfaction with the Reformers' forensic emphasis and testified to a more spiritual and life-transforming conversion. Heinz Kautz and Hans Peissher criticised Melanchthon's formulation of justification by faith as lacking integrity. In their view, "if there was no evidence of the new man in Christ living a different kind of life from what he had lived before, if there was no moral change, then there could have been no forgiveness

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<sup>50</sup>Stayer, Anabaptists 136.

<sup>51</sup>See references above in footnote 41 at p195.

<sup>52</sup>Friedmann, Theology 92ff. Blaurock's terminology was quite consistent with the usages of the South German groups later, but the stress on righteousness distinguished it from that of the Spiritualists. Friedmann concluded that Anabaptists saw baptism in the Spirit as conversion but an intense form of this: "baptism with the Spirit was recognised as a gift of salvation which gives power for the new life": Friedmann, Theology 138. Thus their pneumatology was not Pentecostal in terms of their definition of conversion and baptism in the Spirit, but they expected much more to happen at conversion than the Reformers seemed to expect.



of sins"<sup>53</sup>.

It is clear from the way Anabaptists spoke about their experience of the Spirit that their focus was on ethical change and power for holy living rather than on spiritual phenomena. They were distinguished from the Spiritualists, not only by the greater attention they paid to the written word, but also by this understanding of the Spirit's work as primarily ethical. Their use of terms such as "enlightenment" and "illumination" must be understood in this context.

However, despite the attempts of some scholars to discount spiritual phenomena within Anabaptism, there is evidence that it was not just fringe groups but some of the main congregations and most respected leaders who experienced charismatic phenomena. Hans Hut placed considerable reliance on prophetic dreams and visions<sup>54</sup>, as did the Thuringian Anabaptists generally<sup>55</sup>. The Dutch leaders, Menno Simons and Dirk Phillips were more wary of reliance on visions, especially because of the influence of such revelations in Munster and among certain spiritualist groups, but they accepted them to the extent that they were authenticated by Scripture<sup>56</sup>.

Hubmaier was involved in a revival situation in which miracles were taking place<sup>57</sup>, and Jacob Hutter claimed a miraculous dimension to his ministry

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<sup>53</sup>Friedmann, Theology 163.

<sup>54</sup>Packull, Mysticism 102. Hut is difficult to evaluate because of the paucity of written evidence, but he was the most successful first generation Anabaptist evangelist, and his views would have had a significant impact upon the early congregations.

<sup>55</sup>Oyer, Lutheran 88-9.

<sup>56</sup>Keeney, Dutch 34-5.

<sup>57</sup>Davis, Anabaptism 100.

as an authentication of his calling to the ministry<sup>58</sup>. There were prophetic utterances<sup>59</sup> and prophetic processions<sup>60</sup>, and Williams referred (in disparaging terms) to an area of Germany where some Anabaptists "excited by mass hysteria, experienced healings, glossolalia, contortions and other manifestations of a camp-meeting revival"<sup>61</sup>.

Marpeck's writings contain an extraordinary passage in which he rejected the belief that miracles were restricted to the early church and assured his readers that they were still occurring. He referred to several who had

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<sup>58</sup>RR 424. The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren (Rifton, New York: Plough Publishing House, 1987) contains several accounts of miraculous events: see, for example 54-5, 114, 230-1), and Hutter's prayer of thanks to Jesus for "all his love and faithfulness, the signs and miracles he has shown and is still showing us daily" (111).

<sup>59</sup>Denck, for example, prophesied: "The Lord says freely and openly: 'I would be merciful and mighty enough to help you; but you should know that I am just too. If my strength and mercy are to benefit you at all, you have to accept my justice first; but you do not really want to do that': Furcha & Battles, Denck 91; Walter of Stoelwijk prophesied: "If I the Lord and Master am poor, it is evident that my servants are poor, and that my disciples do not seek or desire riches...He that would follow me, must follow me in the poverty in which I walk before him": see Kreider, "Servant" 14; Martyrs' Mirror (440) contains an account of one Martin who in 1531 was led across a bridge to be executed. He prophesied, "this once yet the pious are led over this bridge, but no more hereafter". The account continues that "this came true, for a short time afterwards, such a violent storm and flood came that the bridge was demolished and carried away". There were also many examples of Anabaptist prophetesses, who, far from being marginalised, were often recognised as leaders within Anabaptist congregations - a further indication that Anabaptism was more charismatic than is often supposed: on these women, see Barrett, Lois Y: "Women's History/Women's Theology: Theological and Methodological Issues in the Writing of the History of Anabaptist-Mennonite Women" CGR Vol 10 No 1 (Winter 1992) 7-13.

<sup>60</sup>In Zürich (1525), in Münster (1534) and in Amsterdam (1535). See Klaassen, Neither 63.

<sup>61</sup>RR 443.



gone joyfully to martyrdom "through the abundant comfort and power of the Holy Spirit" and then made the astonishing statement that "moreover, one also marvels when one sees how the faithful God (who, after all, overflows with goodness) raises from the dead several such brothers and sisters of Christ after they were hanged, drowned or killed in other ways. Even today, they are found alive and we can hear their own testimony"<sup>62</sup>. Marpeck concluded that these things occurred "among those who are powerfully moved and driven by the living Word of God and the Spirit of Christ"<sup>63</sup>.

In their congregational life, too, Anabaptists welcomed the activity of the Holy Spirit. An early Swiss Brethren tract complained about the exclusion of the Spirit from meetings in the state churches<sup>64</sup>. Entfelder, a Moravian Anabaptist leader, defined a church as "a chosen, saved, purified, sanctified group in whom God dwells, upon whom the Holy Spirit has poured out his gifts, and with whom Christ the Lord shares his offices and his mission"<sup>65</sup>. And there was general agreement from the movement's earliest years that church leadership was charismatic in nature and depended on the Spirit's anointing rather than institutional recognition or academic training<sup>66</sup>.

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<sup>62</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 49-51 (italics mine).

<sup>63</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 51. Marpeck's insistence on keeping Word and Spirit together is clear from this conclusion and from his further statement that "Christ bids us to recognize prophets not by miraculous signs, but by their fruits."

<sup>64</sup>AIO 127.

<sup>65</sup>RR 267.

<sup>66</sup>Davis: "Anabaptism and Ascetic Holiness", in Lienhart, Origins 39-40.



The general picture which emerges from a careful study of the sixteenth century sources is of a movement characterised by both literalism and spiritualism. The earliest leaders in Zürich were deeply concerned to obey Scripture in every detail and at times slipped into legalism and wooden interpretations. But the movement they initiated developed as it spread into the surrounding villages into a revival in which the Spirit's work was at least as central to those who joined the Anabaptists as their emphasis on Scripture<sup>67</sup>. As the movement spread further and linked up with other radical groups, the spiritual dimension was emphasised, although the continuing focus on the New Testament as the source of ultimate authority and on ethical change as evidence of the Spirit's work distinguished Anabaptism from the Spiritualists. It was the ability of leaders like Marpeck and Menno to hold in tension Word and Spirit that enabled much of the movement to avoid the extremes of literalism and spiritualism.

That the Anabaptists' descendants have tended to err on the side of literalism and to denigrate the role of the Holy Spirit, both in their own experience and in their understanding of their heritage, is a result of the move towards literalism and away from reliance on the Spirit which occurred in the second and third generations of the movement (a familiar pattern in revival movements). But this should not prejudice the interpretation of evidence from the first generation of a movement in which the experience of the Spirit was crucial and of major significance in many

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<sup>67</sup>Some Anabaptist prophetesses were to be found in the early Zürich circle, such as Margaret Hottinger, baptised by Georg Blaurock, Magdalena Muller, Barbara Murglin and Frena Bumenin. See Barrett, "Women's" 8.

areas of theology and practice<sup>68</sup>.

The significance of this for Anabaptist hermeneutics is that it is illegitimate to relegate references to the Spirit as the interpreter of Scripture to the realm of theory. The early Anabaptists believed their experience of the Spirit would enable them to interpret Scripture. They were also determined to listen to the Spirit rather than to scholars, traditions or official representatives of the state churches<sup>69</sup>. What this meant in practice, for individuals and for congregations, will be explored below, although there is no clear explanation in Anabaptist writings of how the Spirit enabled interpretation. What is very evident, however, is that reliance on the Spirit applied to understanding Scripture, not just responding to it, and that the Spirit was expected to guide interpreters actively rather than simply through their reasoning abilities and hard work.

It was this equation of the Spirit's role with human reasoning that the Anabaptists perceived among the Reformers, and that they regarded as illegitimate. The Reformers spoke about the Holy Spirit, but the Anabaptists were unconvinced that the Spirit was allowed to operate in the state churches. Luther, in his early years, appeared to give a significant role to the Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture, writing, "The Bible cannot be mastered by study or talent; you must rely solely on the influx

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<sup>68</sup>EBI 35.

<sup>69</sup>Oyer, Lutheran 214.



of the Spirit"<sup>70</sup>; but reacting against those within his own camp and elsewhere whom he suspected of opposing Spirit to Word, he increasingly stressed the letter of Scripture and its interpretation by those qualified and accredited for the task<sup>71</sup>. Zwingli testified "I understand Scripture only in the way that it interprets itself by the Spirit of God. It does not require any human opinion"<sup>72</sup>; but the breach with Zwingli resulted from the Anabaptists' dissatisfaction with his readiness to allow secular authorities to determine how Scripture should be understood and applied<sup>73</sup>.

The Reformer whose emphasis on the Spirit was closest to that of the Anabaptists was Martin Bucer. David Steinmetz summarised his approach: "The Holy Spirit has been given to Christians in order to guide them in the understanding of Scripture. A man who does not have the Spirit is blind and unable to understand the message of the Bible. Insight into Scripture is given only to the man who has the Spirit, and the Spirit is

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<sup>70</sup>Quoted in Rogers & McKim, Authority 79. Similarly Ray Penn quoted Luther's comment, "God must say to you in your ear, this is God's word", and contrasted this with the tendency among other Reformers, and especially Calvin, to emphasise the objective authority of Scripture rather than the role of the Spirit. See Penn, C Ray: "Competing Hermeneutical Foundations and Religious Communication: Why Protestants Can't Understand Each Other", in Packer, James I: The Best of Theology Volume III (Carol Stream, Illinois: Christianity Today Inc, 1989) 345-6.

<sup>71</sup>Horst: The Radical Brethren (Nieuwkoop: B De Graaf, 1972) 63-4.

<sup>72</sup>George, Theology 128. See also Stephens, Theology 60.

<sup>73</sup>The well-known expression of this was Simon Stumpf's cry at the second Zürich Disputation: "Master Ulrich, you have not the right to leave the decision of this question to the Council. The matter is already decided; the Spirit of God decides it": Harder, Sources 242. It is worth noting, in line with earlier comments, that Stumpf spoke of the authority of the Spirit here, rather than the authority of Scripture: in practice, Anabaptists saw these authorities as united.



given only to the man who has faith in Jesus Christ"<sup>74</sup>. Bucer appears to have understood and sympathised with the Anabaptists more than most of the Reformers. He won several back to the state church by persuading them that he was serious about introducing reforms in line with their convictions. It is arguable that Bucer's views were influenced by his discussions with Marpeck, and that Marpeck's views were likewise influenced by Bucer. There remained significant areas of disagreement between them, but it was here that Reformers and Anabaptists came closest to understanding each other. On the issue of Spirit and Word, Marpeck and Bucer together seem to have held the centre ground. Their respect for each other and the positive influence each had on the other's thinking offers a tantalising glimpse of what might have resulted from a more creative dialogue between Reformers and Anabaptists.

But the Anabaptists' concern was that the Spirit was being quenched by the Reformers and that this disqualified them as trustworthy interpreters of Scripture. Marpeck complained that "the dull teachers have lost the sharpness of the Word, and the sword of the Spirit has been stolen from them and given over to human power. Thus the discipline of the Spirit, the sharpness of the Word, has been discontinued and blasphemed"<sup>75</sup>. Adolf Ens concluded that the Anabaptist emphasis on the Spirit's role in interpreting Scripture was a reaction to the Reformers' stress on education and learning that seemed unduly to restrict the freedom implied by their comments about the Spirit<sup>76</sup>.

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<sup>74</sup>Steinmetz, Reformers 123; see also McGrath, Intellectual 171.

<sup>75</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 299.

<sup>76</sup>Ens: "Theology of the Hermeneutical Community in Anabaptist-Mennonite Thought", in Huebner, Church 75.

The Anabaptists seem not to have sensed any tension between their insistence on the plain meaning of Scripture and the role they ascribed to the Holy Spirit. They expected the Spirit to help them, despite their lack of education and human sinfulness, to discover the simple truths of Scripture - not to reveal complex hidden meanings. Nor was there any conflict between relying on the Spirit and obeying the literal words of Scripture. Indeed, their criticism of the Reformers was that they erred in both these areas, in that they did not truly give the Spirit freedom to interpret Scripture, and they allowed other influences to distract them from (what the Anabaptists considered) the plain meanings of the text. The Anabaptists believed that relying on the Spirit was more than theoretical and that the result of such reliance would be a more faithful application of Scripture than that produced by relying on tradition, learning or human reason. They saw no necessary conflict between Spirit and Word. As a charismatic but biblical movement, they were committed to a "pneumatic exegesis"<sup>77</sup> of Scripture, the implications of which will be explored in the following sections.

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<sup>77</sup>A phrase used tentatively by Dyck, in EBI 37.

### C. The Spirit in the Individual

Contrary to some assertions<sup>1</sup>, Anabaptism located interpretative authority in the congregation rather than in the inspired individual. Everything said here, therefore, about the Spirit's role in the individual interpreter should be set in the context of the Spirit's role in the congregation. But this community was inevitably made up of individuals and its ability to interpret Scripture depended on the contributions of its members - since it refused to rely on certain theologically qualified interpreters to guide it. These contributions, the Anabaptists taught, should be the fruit of the Spirit's illuminating work, both in his instruction of individual believers and in his revelation of truth to those believers as they gathered together.

Such illumination was regarded as one aspect of the relationship between the Spirit and believers. Anabaptist writings contain numerous references to this feature of their hermeneutic. Marpeck wrote: "Our life is hidden with Christ in God...We are taught, not by man, but by God, the Holy Spirit himself"<sup>2</sup>. According to Menno, "willingness to be instructed by the Spirit" was a prerequisite for gaining an understanding of Scripture<sup>3</sup>. Hut taught that "the Word must be received in him with a true heart through the Holy Spirit and become flesh in us"<sup>4</sup>. Jacob Hutter referred to the

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<sup>1</sup>See Augsburg, "Conversion" 252.

<sup>2</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 451.

<sup>3</sup>Ens: "Theology of the Hermeneutical Community in Anabaptist-Mennonite Thought", in Huebner, Church 80. Henry Poettcker summarised: "For Menno the Spirit is the agent who illuminates the Scriptures, opens their message to men, gives counsel, and supplies the power to preach the Word correctly": Poettcker: "Anabaptist-Mennonite Hermeneutics", in Dyck, Witness 366.

<sup>4</sup>EBI 37.



combination of "the light and brilliance of his Holy Spirit and through God's Word" as the source of the Christian's guidance<sup>5</sup>. And Denck wrote, "The Spirit equips and arms the elect with the mind and thoughts of Christ"<sup>6</sup>. There are also various indications in these and other writings of how this illumination or instruction was expected to function, and the consequences of relying on it.

First, it was to check naive and legalistic conclusions about the Bible's meaning. There was confidence that ordinary believers, who, if left to their own resources, would misinterpret or simply fail to comprehend Scripture, could rely on the Spirit for insight into how Scripture should be interpreted. It was this confidence that the Reformers lacked, with the result that they placed restrictions on the right of ordinary believers to interpret Scripture. But Anabaptist leaders, who had witnessed the effect of the Spirit's work in their people and the ability they now possessed to deal responsibly with Scripture, were willing to rely on the Spirit to protect their members from harmful errors and illegitimate applications.

The statements of various ordinary Anabaptists indicate that they revelled in this freedom and took seriously the need to rely on the Spirit's guidance. This was not just lip-service but an expectation rooted in their personal experience of the Spirit. John Claess, for example, writing to his brother and sister in 1544, urged them, "search the Word of God, and ask Him for His Holy Spirit, and the same shall instruct you in everything which is needful for you"<sup>7</sup>. Imprisoned Anabaptists frequently claimed the

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<sup>5</sup>EBI 37.

<sup>6</sup>EBI 36.

<sup>7</sup>MM 470.

Lord gave them understanding of Scripture and enabled them to confound educated but supposedly unspiritual inquisitors<sup>8</sup>. The grudging admiration of such opponents suggests Anabaptist leaders had good grounds for their confidence that reliance on the Spirit was realistic. Their opponents frequently disagreed with the Anabaptists' conclusions, but they were constantly astonished at their understanding and ability to explain biblical texts<sup>9</sup>, an ability Anabaptists attributed to their reliance on the Holy Spirit.

As for the leaders, it was their reliance on the Spirit which makes it difficult to convict them of undue literalism and legalism. Their commitment to the plain meaning of Scripture was balanced by their openness to the Spirit's direction as to its import, and saved many of them from wooden literalism and naive proof-texting<sup>10</sup>. As Cornelius Dyck commented, "Most Anabaptists took the Scriptures very seriously and usually literally, but always relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit in interpreting their meaning"<sup>11</sup>.

Second, reliance on the Spirit was preferred to reliance on education and scholarship. Hoffman taught that "the true scholar is not he who is knowledgeable in books but he whose knowledge is of the spirit"<sup>12</sup>. As noted above<sup>13</sup>, the Anabaptists did not totally reject these natural

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<sup>8</sup>For example, MM 487, 494.

<sup>9</sup>See references from Martyrs' Mirror in the section on Scripture as self-interpreting.

<sup>10</sup>So Estep ("Ecumenical" 360) concluded with reference to Menno, and Beachey (Grace 152) with reference to Marpeck.

<sup>11</sup>EBI 37.

<sup>12</sup>Deppermann, Hoffman 64.

<sup>13</sup>See above at pp92-4.

abilities, but they were wary of placing undue weight on them and concerned that sometimes they led interpreters away from the true meaning of Scripture. The Spirit was regarded as the true teacher and guide, on whom both educated and illiterate believer should depend. As Kenneth Davis concluded<sup>14</sup>, the Anabaptists taught that Scripture must be interpreted, not by "technically qualified theologians essentially (the magisterial 'scribes'), but spiritually, by the Holy Spirit in the context of the redeemed community."

Some Anabaptist leaders acknowledged that scholarship and linguistic ability could provide some measure of understanding of Scripture. Rideman, however, referring to 1 Corinthians 2, concluded: "As the scripture came by the Holy Spirit we must let it be judged by the same. Who, however, can attain this judgment, apart from him who hath the Holy Spirit, for the carnal man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God"<sup>15</sup>. The clear implication is that any attempt to understand Scripture by the use of natural abilities is bound to be unproductive. Denck suggested that approaching Scripture without relying on the Spirit not only hindered good fruit being produced<sup>16</sup>, but actually resulted in harmful consequences. "The natural man cannot understand the Bible and is unable to deal with it by himself without making a sacrilege of it...For the person seeking the truth without the Spirit of God, there is not only no truth, but actual

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<sup>14</sup>Davis, in Lienhard, Origins 40. See also EBI 5, 37; Friedmann, Theology 19-20.

<sup>15</sup>Rideman, Confession 198.

<sup>16</sup>Furcha & Battles, Denck 15.



death"<sup>17</sup>.

Rothmann quoted the warning in II Peter about avoiding private interpretation of prophecy, not as a basis for urging reliance upon qualified teachers but to emphasise the need for the Holy Spirit. He wrote, "Peter says: No prophecy is a matter of one's own interpretation. Each one must be taught, but not through the written interpretation of men in glosses or postils. Rather God and his Spirit must be the master here"<sup>18</sup>. The imprisoned Adrian Corneliss defended himself against the charge that as an uneducated man he was ill-equipped to interpret Scripture: "We have not studied in Latin Universities, but in the highly celebrated school of the Gospel, of which the Spirit of God is teacher"<sup>19</sup>.

Third, there was no attempt to oppose reliance on the Spirit and the use of common sense in interpreting Scripture. The Swiss Brethren, Hubmaier and Menno all appealed, in various ways, to reason in interpreting of Scripture<sup>20</sup>. There is no inconsistency here, for the Anabaptists had a more positive view of redeemed human nature than the Reformers, and their experience of the Spirit's transforming power encouraged them to believe that their minds were being enlightened and their reasoning ability enhanced by the Spirit's work.

Fourth, the Spirit's work was perceived to include not only explanation of Scripture but conviction and persuasion so that the interpreter acted on

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<sup>17</sup>Klaassen, Walter: "Some Anabaptist Views on the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit" (MQR XXXV) 138.

<sup>18</sup>AIO 149.

<sup>19</sup>MM 534.

<sup>20</sup>On Hubmaier and the Swiss Brethren, see Klaassen, "Speaking" 144-5; on Menno, see EBI 73.

it<sup>21</sup>. As Marpeck wrote, "The Word does not ignite itself where God does not make it alive"<sup>22</sup>. And Hubmaier wrote of the Spirit's work of impressing the truth of Scripture on the interpreter and enabling him to obey it: "The divine Word is so powerful, authoritative, and strong in the believers that the person (though not the godless one) can will and do everything that the said Word commands him to want and do"<sup>23</sup>. The expectancy that the Spirit would not only interpret Scripture but inspire a response to the teaching of Scripture is another indication that reliance on the Spirit provided a safeguard against undue legalism.

Fifth, an important consequence of the Anabaptists' reliance on the Spirit was openness to correction and fresh revelation. Despite their criticisms of the state churches for their seeming unspirituality, they did not reject the possibility that the Spirit might speak through the Reformers or through those who were interrogating them. Franklin Littell commented that their "willingness to discuss openly and to accept correction when its need was proved was one of the striking things about their behaviour in an age of unrelieved stubbornness and deafness of brother towards Christian brother". He ascribed this unusual attitude to the fact that "for them truth was given by the Holy Spirit, the governor of the people of God"<sup>24</sup>.

Sixth, certain safeguards were built into this reliance on the Spirit, and warnings issued to protect the unwary from error. The Anabaptist leaders may have been optimistic about the Spirit's work in believers, as is clear

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<sup>21</sup>Estep, Anabaptist 144.

<sup>22</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 144.

<sup>23</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 444.

<sup>24</sup>Littell, Church 65.



from Rideman's comment that "those who have him [the Holy Spirit] will easily recognize what is meant here concerning Christ"<sup>25</sup>, but they were realistic about how reliance on the Spirit could be used to authorise strange interpretations. Various aberrations and extreme practices that plagued early Anabaptism demonstrate the risks involved in encouraging believers to rely on the Spirit's guidance in interpreting Scripture<sup>26</sup>.

The leaders provided certain warnings and guidelines. Marpeck warned interpreters to be careful not to force the Holy Spirit, nor to allow personal desires or opinions to masquerade as the Spirit's leading<sup>27</sup>. Menno issued a similar warning and urged that reason be used not to sit in judgment on Scripture but as a check against wild interpretations<sup>28</sup>. But locating the main authority for interpretation in the congregation was the primary safeguard.

#### D. The Spirit in the Church

Reference was made above<sup>29</sup> to the charismatic ecclesiology that characterised Anabaptism. The gathered congregation was the primary locus of the Spirit's activity, as well as the setting within which Scripture was read and obeyed<sup>30</sup>. As it interpreted Scripture the congregation anticipated the Spirit's direction in both the contributions made by individuals and the

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<sup>25</sup>Rideman, Confession 198 (italics mine).

<sup>26</sup>RR 829-30.

<sup>27</sup>EBI 73.

<sup>28</sup>EBI 73.

<sup>29</sup>See above at p200.

<sup>30</sup>No attempt will be made in this section to deal fully with the concept of the hermeneutical community, to which topic a later section is devoted. See below at pp224ff. The focus here is on one particular aspect of this - the Spirit's role in the corporate interpretation practised by the Anabaptists.



consensus that emerged. They listened to one another to discern what the Spirit was saying. It was this emphasis on the Spirit's activity in the church which differentiated Anabaptist hermeneutics from other sixteenth century options.

First, it distinguished Anabaptist congregations from Catholic churches and the Reformers' churches. The Anabaptists frequently complained that there was no opportunity in the state churches for the Spirit to guide the congregation. The predominance of the priest or preacher assumed that he was a sufficient channel for receiving the Spirit's direction, but the Anabaptists were unwilling to make this assumption. They believed that through discussion and readiness to learn from each other and to test what was said, the Spirit would lead them into truth. The pastor might play a role, even a leading role, in this process, but the Spirit's work was not confined to one channel.

Second, this emphasis on the Spirit's work in the gathered church distinguished Anabaptists from the Spiritualists. Although the Spirit illuminated individuals as they read Scripture, until the individual's understanding was tested in the congregation it was to be treated cautiously. The Spirit's work was held to involve both revelation and unity. He not only led believers into the truth, but he led them together. The testimony of the Schleithem participants that "we have been united"<sup>31</sup> referred to the fact that they had met to resolve disagreements and had experienced the Spirit's work in bringing them to a common mind. John

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<sup>31</sup>This phrase and similar ones occur several times in the Schleithem Confession. See Yoder, Schleithem 10-16; see also Dyck, Introduction 137-8.

Yoder overstated the case when he wrote "The Spirit is an interpreter of what a text is about only when Christians are gathered in readiness to hear it speak to their current needs and concerns"<sup>32</sup>, but there is no doubt that this was the context within which individual interpretations were shared, discussed and refined.

This emphasis on the Spirit's work also prevented Anabaptists relying on a democratic process of majority rule. This was not an operative concept in the sixteenth century, nor was this process a live option in any other sixteenth century group, but it might have been the result of Anabaptist congregationalism without the emphasis on the Spirit as the Lord of the church<sup>33</sup>. The goal of the congregation as it gathered to interpret Scripture was to discover the mind of Christ by truly hearing from the Holy Spirit. They were aware of the frailty of human nature and yet confident that somehow the Spirit's voice would be heard. This might be through the majority, but it might also be through a minority. The congregation's task was not to count hands but to discern through whom the Spirit was speaking. Only within a congregation that perceived itself to be a charismatic community could this kind of consensus decision-making be practised.

Within Anabaptism, then, a different hermeneutical option was embodied. It may not have been articulated clearly or practised consistently, but it was genuinely different and contributed significantly to the way the movement developed and dealt with various issues. Anabaptists did not accept that theologians or pastors were the sole channels of the Spirit's

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<sup>32</sup>EBI 21 (*italics mine*).

<sup>33</sup>Dyck, Introduction 137-8.



revelation, as appeared to be the case in practice among the Reformers. Nor did they accept that enough revelation had been received already during the history of the church so that the present generation was absolved from the responsibility of listening to the Spirit, as in Catholicism. Nor did they accept that the individual was the best judge of what the Spirit might be saying, as among the Spiritualists. Instead confidence was placed in the interaction of written Word, illuminating Spirit and gathered congregation.

#### E. The Inner Word and the Outer Word

But this interaction between Spirit and Word was the subject of much debate, as the charges and counter-charges of literalism and spiritualism demonstrate. In any movement where the Spirit's work is experienced rather than confined to theology or church history, questions arise about the relationship between what the Spirit has said in the past through Scripture and what He appears to be saying in the present through personal revelation. That the Anabaptists faced such questions is further evidence that they are rightly perceived as a charismatic movement.

Some scholars have emphasised that the Anabaptists relied on the written Word as their source of authority and castigated the Spiritualists for setting this aside in favour of subjective guidance. William Keeney, for example, insisted that Menno Simons and Dirk Phillips, although they recognised their need of the Spirit to interpret Scripture, "never went to the extreme of such men as Melchior Hoffman, David Joris and Sebastian Franck." They rejected visions "as valid sources of spiritual knowledge



unless they were clearly subordinated to the Scriptures"<sup>34</sup>.

Dutch Anabaptists were particularly sensitive on this issue after Münster, where "revelations" had led to Scripture being set aside and various outrageous practices being adopted. Anabaptism in the Low Countries had been strongly influenced by Hoffman, whose attitude towards prophecies and visions was more positive than many Anabaptists<sup>35</sup> - although Hoffman himself remained committed to the written Word in a way that some of his followers did not<sup>36</sup>.

But Dutch Anabaptists did not dismiss out of hand all extra-biblical revelation. Keeney, in the passage quoted above, left open the possibility that Dirk and Menno would have accepted the validity of such revelations providing they were tested by comparison with Scripture. It is arguable that this stance, which is in line with New Testament teaching on testing prophecies<sup>37</sup>, rather than dismissal of such revelations, characterised mainstream Anabaptism. Some groups emphasised prophecies, visions and dreams more than others, but throughout the movement it was accepted that the Spirit might speak to believers directly, or through their brothers and sisters, as well as through the written Word - although nothing He was thought to be saying in the present could contradict what He had said in Scripture.

It is important to read Anabaptist statements on this issue in context. Arguing against Spiritualists, they appeared negative towards extra-

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<sup>34</sup>Keeney, Dutch 34-5.

<sup>35</sup>Horsch, Mennonites 172.

<sup>36</sup>Horst, Radical 172.

<sup>37</sup>See, for example, 1 Thess 5:19.

biblical revelation, because of their concern that the written Word was being devalued. But in debate with the Reformers, whom they felt were devaluing the Spirit's work, or with more literalistic Anabaptist groups, they stressed the intuitive and personal aspects of revelation<sup>38</sup>. Both Dirk and Menno taught that intuition helped one decide whether passages should be interpreted literally or spiritually<sup>39</sup>. Henry Poettcker concluded that "Menno could not separate the Spirit and the Scriptures. On the one hand the understanding of the Holy Spirit is attained by a study of the Scriptures, while on the other the Scriptures cannot be understood except the Holy Spirit interpret them"<sup>40</sup>.

Among the Swiss Brethren, whose emphasis was firmly on the written Word, there were references to the Spirit speaking, but usually the context indicates that this was another way of quoting Scripture. Since the Spirit was recognised as the author of Scripture, "the Spirit says" could mean "the Bible says" and frequently this phrase prefaced a direct quotation or paraphrase of Scripture. However, the use of this phrase indicates an awareness of the continuing activity of the Spirit and His role in applying Scripture to contemporary situations<sup>41</sup>.

Sattler, however, went beyond this usage and placed greater reliance than most of the Swiss on what he called "the grace and revelation of God"<sup>42</sup>. Arnold Snyder concluded that Sattler probably relied on direct revelation for guidance, but that the limits of that revelation were set by his

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<sup>38</sup>Keeney, Dutch 35. See also RR 830.

<sup>39</sup>Keeney, Dutch 41.

<sup>40</sup>EBI 71-2.

<sup>41</sup>EBI 18.

<sup>42</sup>Snyder, Sattler 164.

Christocentric reading of Scripture<sup>43</sup>. This appears to bring Sattler's practice into line with the Dutch leaders.

As for Marpeck, his statement that "the Word does not ignite itself where God does not make it alive"<sup>44</sup> has already been noted, as has his conviction that it was impossible to handle the written Word correctly if "the Holy Spirit, the true teacher, does not precede in all knowledge of Christ"<sup>45</sup>. His commitment to the written Word is beyond dispute, despite the Swiss Brethren's doubts about this, but he also insisted: "We are not taught by the human voice, by the literal, external teaching of Christ and the apostolic teaching of the gospel. We are taught, not by man, but by God, the Holy Spirit himself"<sup>46</sup>. No Anabaptist opposed Spiritualist teachings more firmly than Marpeck<sup>47</sup>, but in debates with them he refused to minimise the significance of the Spirit. Just as Menno's statements must be read in context, so Marpeck's position must be assessed by comparing his debates with Schwenckfeld and his letters to the Swiss Brethren<sup>48</sup>.

Among German Anabaptists, especially in circles influenced by Denck, the relationship between Spirit and Word was discussed in slightly different terms. These groups stressed that the written Word was not an end in itself, but rather a container for the living Word, Christ himself. They

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<sup>43</sup>Snyder, Sattler 164.

<sup>44</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 144.

<sup>45</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 359.

<sup>46</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 451.

<sup>47</sup>See EBI 82.

<sup>48</sup>See also Klassen's comments on Marpeck's colleague, Scharnshlager, in EBI 85-6.



distinguished the Outer Word from the Inner Word<sup>49</sup>. The implication was that there was a deep spiritual "word" from God beneath the surface of the text, a word that was revealed by the Spirit. Denck called the Bible a lantern in which the true light was to be found and a sheath for the Spirit's sword<sup>50</sup>. He was personally immersed in Scripture and clearly demonstrated its importance to him by translating the Old Testament into German. But he feared bibliolatry and constantly urged his followers and opponents to press beyond the written words to the living Word<sup>51</sup>.

Some of Denck's statements seemed to exalt the Inner Word over the Outer. In his "Confession addressed to the City Council of Nuernburg" in 1525, he asserted: "It belongs to the Holy Spirit to expound it correctly who has given it in the beginning. Every man must be certain of the interpretation of the Spirit beforehand. If this is not the case the interpretation is false and worthless"<sup>52</sup>. In "The Law of God" in 1526, he wrote: "Whoever thinks he can keep the Law by following the good Book ascribes to the dead

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<sup>49</sup>Harder, Hermeneutic 23-4 concluded that these Anabaptists employed outer/inner word terminology that was common in earlier mystical traditions but modified its meaning.

<sup>50</sup>Furcha & Battles, Denck 15-6.

<sup>51</sup>For example, in "The Law of God", he wrote: "He who honours Scripture but lacks divine love must take heed not to turn Scripture into an idol as do all scribes who are not 'learned' for the kingdom of God": Furcha & Battles, Denck 63. For a survey of others on the spiritualist wing of Anabaptism, see Friedmann, Hutterite 254ff. Friedmann suggested that Ulrich Stadler was the foremost authority among early Anabaptists on the subject of the inner and outer words, having written a special tract on this topic. Friedmann characterised Stadler's position as "biblical spiritualism" - distinct from both "pure" spiritualism" and legalism: Friedmann, Hutterite 271. This label would seem to apply equally well to Denck and other spiritualistic Anabaptists.

<sup>52</sup>Furcha & Battles, Denck 16.

letter what belongs to the living Spirit"<sup>53</sup>, and later he added that an interpreter, struggling over a difficult text and considering a possible meaning for it, "does not accept it unless it be expounded to him by the anointing of the Spirit"<sup>54</sup>.

However, it is clear from the context of these statements, and from the statements themselves, that Denck's concern was not to oppose Scripture and the Spirit, but to show how the two worked together. He wanted to avoid lifeless literalism by emphasising the importance of reading Scripture under the Spirit's tutelage. But he, too, issued the common Anabaptist warning that Scripture is the judge of interpretation. In the same passage where he urged reliance on the Spirit to avoid "false and worthless" interpretations, he explained that such interpretations must be judged, not by intuition, but by Scripture. He wrote: "whatever is false and worthless can be disproved by other testimony of Scripture"<sup>55</sup>.

Some scholars have judged Denck's mystical approach incompatible with Anabaptism and have either marginalised him<sup>56</sup> or promoted him<sup>57</sup>, depending on their evaluation of his contribution. In an age of bitter disputes over theology and ecclesiology, Denck's gentle spirit and emphasis on love appear attractive, but it is argued that this was at the expense of compromising on the clear commands of Scripture.

It seems, however, especially in view of Denck's commitment to Scripture, that the difference between his views and those of other Anabaptists has

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<sup>53</sup>Furcha & Battles, Denck 59.

<sup>54</sup>Furcha & Battles, Denck 67.

<sup>55</sup>Furcha & Battles, Denck 16.

<sup>56</sup>For example, Horsch, Mennonites 156. See also EBI 82.

<sup>57</sup>Coutts, Denck.



been overstated. His writings tended on occasions towards universalism or blurred the distinction between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit<sup>58</sup>, and there are statements which, taken in isolation, appear to denigrate Scripture<sup>59</sup>. But it is unlikely that Denck was any further from the putative "centre" of Anabaptism on the spiritualistic side than Grebel and Manz were on the literalistic side. Kenneth Davis concluded that "never, not even in the South German branch, was God's will to be discerned by some inner light independent from or totally separate from the Scriptures"<sup>60</sup>.

Again it is important to recall that the issue of Spirit and Word was not resolved in any of the main groups in the early sixteenth century. Alfred Coutts, in his appreciative study of Denck, examined how the Reformers, and in particular Luther, struggled to find the balance. He suggested, contrary to accepted wisdom, that in fact Luther did not set up Scripture as the authority but his own inward experience of justification by faith which he found in Scripture and which he used to interpret Scripture<sup>61</sup>. He wrote: "when the Reformers asserted the absolute and final authority of

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<sup>58</sup>Coutts, Denck 36-7.

<sup>59</sup>For example, "he who truly possesses truth can determine it without Scripture": Coutts, Denck 59.

<sup>60</sup>Davis: "Anabaptism and Ascetic Holiness", in Stayer & Packull, Anabaptists 59.

<sup>61</sup>Coutts, Denck 103. This appears to agree with the conclusion above about Luther's use of justification by faith as the key to Scripture: see pp34, 54. Ferguson seems to have been in agreement with Coutts, writing that "each passage should be interpreted in the light of the whole, which meant for Luther, in light of his understanding of the central message of the Bible, justification by faith": Ferguson, Biblical 161 (*italics mine*).



Scripture, they were not consciously setting up the letter of Scripture as their standard, but the Holy Spirit whose voice is heard in the written Word. It was the inspiration of the Spirit which gave the Scripture its uniqueness and value"<sup>62</sup>. Coutts concluded that "what was implicitly accepted by Reformation theology, Denck and other spiritual Reformers explicitly taught, that the ultimate authority from which there is no appeal is the Holy Spirit, who speaks to men directly by the Inner Word"<sup>63</sup>.

Coutts surely overstated his case, with regard both to the Reformers and to Denck, for neither opposed Spirit and Word in the way he suggested. But his study illustrates the difficulty of interpreting the various positions on this issue that were current in the early years of the Reformation. Some stressed the written Word as the objective source of revelation. Others emphasised the living Word - Christ and his Spirit - as the means by which this written revelation could be effectually communicated to believers. At each extreme lay danger, but within these extremes were many who were attempting to find an acceptable balance. That a careful examination of Anabaptists like Menno, Sattler and Marpeck, and even Reformers like Luther, reveals such variety of expressions and approaches on this issue suggests that Denck should also be located between these extremes, even if his expressions were open to misunderstanding<sup>64</sup>.

Indeed, despite suspicions that they tended to devalue the written word,

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<sup>62</sup>Coutts, Denck 105.

<sup>63</sup>Coutts, Denck 106. See also Klassen, Consultation 74-5 for an even stronger claim along similar lines.

<sup>64</sup>EBI 82.

the South Germans' terminology - "inner word" or "living word" - in some ways tied together Word and Spirit more firmly than other Anabaptist explanations. For they saw the Spirit's role, not as adding to Scripture or as another source of authority, but as revealing the true depth of Scripture itself.

In summary, Anabaptism offered various perspectives on the issue of Word and Spirit, but the contribution of the movement as a whole was to provide a mediating alternative to the Reformers, who seemed to give inadequate room to the Spirit, and to the Spiritualists who seemed to give inadequate room to the Word. Sometimes they erred too far in the direction of spiritualism or literalism. Sometimes they were naive or overconfident. But in a period of considerable uncertainty about the relationship between Word and Spirit, they demonstrated a commitment to both and challenged those who were tempted to denigrate either.

### A. Introduction

It has been impossible in earlier sections to ignore the role of the congregation. Weaknesses in hermeneutical principles were seen to be less significant when account was taken of the congregational setting in which they operated<sup>1</sup>. Here attention will be given to the congregation itself to expand on the tangential consideration given to it in previous sections.

Anabaptist writings provide much of the evidence necessary to assess the distinctiveness of this approach in the sixteenth century, the way in which it developed and the biblical basis on which the Anabaptists sought to establish it. There are indications, too, from several accounts of congregational meetings and from the proceedings of translocal meetings, such as the important Schleithem conference, of how this principle operated in practice.

### B. The Hermeneutic Community

The term *hermeneutic community* was not used by Anabaptists. It is a scholarly definition of the role of their congregations in interpreting Scripture<sup>2</sup>. There is no extended discussion of this role within Anabaptist writings, and few references to it. Perhaps for this reason many summaries of Anabaptist hermeneutics have given little attention to the congregation

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<sup>1</sup>See above at pp95, 212ff.

<sup>2</sup>See Ens, Adolf: "Theology of the Hermeneutical Community in Anabaptist-Mennonite Thought", in Huebner, Church 69. Several other terms have been used: Walter Klaassen referred to *Gemeindetheologie* which he translated as congregation-theology: Klaassen, Neither 42; Driver, Becoming 90 referred to the "interpreting community".



as the setting within which interpretation took place<sup>3</sup>.

But the Anabaptists' adoption of a congregational setting for biblical interpretation was very important and distinguished them from their contemporaries. First, they refused to subscribe to the autonomous individualism of the Spiritualists. Menno wrote, in his "Instruction on Discipline to the Church at Emden" in 1556: "I can neither teach nor live by the faith of others. I must live by my own faith as the Spirit of the Lord has taught me through His Word"<sup>4</sup>. This sounds like pure spiritualism, but immediately Menno referred to others who had different understandings of Scripture on the subject, and complained that "everyone follows his own head, and imagines it to be the Spirit and Scripture." His remedy for this was corporate discernment of Scripture's meaning. Similarly Marpeck was convinced that the congregation was responsible for establishing and expounding the truth rather than Spirit-filled individuals, the approach adopted by his opponent, Schwenckfeld<sup>5</sup>.

The Anabaptists were committed to the right of all believers to read and interpret Scripture, but from the movement's earliest years their understanding of community was so strong that it was unthinkable that this right should be exercised in isolation or not be subject to testing in

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<sup>3</sup>Ens: "Theology of the Hermeneutical Community in Anabaptist-Mennonite Thought", in Huebner, Church 69.

<sup>4</sup>Menno, Works 1051.

<sup>5</sup>Steinmetz, Reformers 228-9. Steinmetz summarised Marpeck's position as follows: "The interpretation of Scripture is a communal activity, in which the exegesis of individual members of the church is subject to the community as a whole".

congregational meetings<sup>6</sup>. The commitment to economic sharing, discipling one another and openness to correction from others, which was evident in Anabaptist congregations and distinguished them from the state churches and from the Spiritualists, was paralleled by a recognition that biblical interpretation also was a communal responsibility.

Second, they rejected the Catholic model, in which the right of private interpretation was drastically curtailed by the need to submit to the authority of Church traditions. Here the Church functioned, not as a contemporary hermeneutical community, but as a repository of past wisdom and authoritative interpretations. The responsibility of the individual believer for interpreting Scripture was practically non-existent, and even the priests and theologians were expected mainly to reinforce and perhaps clarify earlier tradition<sup>7</sup>.

The Anabaptists accepted that the Church had a significant role in biblical interpretation, but they located this in the present rather than the past, and in local congregations rather than a monolithic structure. In addition, they rejected the Catholic position that the Church was over the Bible because it had historically formed the canon of Scripture. Their commitment to sola scriptura prevented them giving any such authority to the Church. Rather, the congregation was where Scripture was heard and its

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<sup>6</sup>Driver, Becoming 90; Ens, in Huebner, Church 75-6; Klassen, Covenant 182; Weaver, Becoming 129.

<sup>7</sup>Ben Ollenburger (EBI 48) suggested that the Anabaptists were quite close in spirit to the conciliar movement within the Catholic church, but there is no evidence that congregational hermeneutics was derived from that source. See also Ens: "Theology of the Hermeneutical Community in Anabaptist-Mennonite Thought, in Huebner, Church 71.



meaning and application discerned: but Church traditions remained firmly subject to the authority of the Word<sup>8</sup>.

Third, they rejected the Reformers' application of the *sola scriptura* principle. They agreed with the Reformers that Church traditions should not, as in the Catholic churches, sit in authority over Scripture<sup>9</sup>. But they were disappointed by the way the Reformers allowed other authorities to influence interpretation and application. They rejected the binding influence of doctrinal commitments and fixed creeds, regarding these as merely human opinions which should not prevent believers from looking afresh together at Scripture. They rejected also the inhibiting influence of political authorities and the deference paid to these by the Reformers, believing that this inevitably affected the conclusions reached about the Bible's meaning. And they rejected reliance on theological expertise and scholarship, which, they felt, disenfranchised most Christians in the area of biblical interpretation and replaced the tyranny of the priest with the tyranny of the preacher<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup>Littell, Church 21.

<sup>9</sup>See Penn: "Competing Hermeneutical Foundations and Religious Communication: Why Protestants Can't Understand Each Other", in Packer: Best 345.

<sup>10</sup>The restrictive practice of biblical interpretation among the Reformers is evident from Phyllis Bird's reminder that Luther not only insisted on expository sermons at every service but proposed that such sermons should be read from a prepared collection on the ground that "there are so few gifted preachers who are able to give a powerful and practical exposition": Bird, Bible 45. So even the preachers were dependent on an elite scholarly monopoly.



An early Swiss Brethren tract<sup>11</sup> complained that "all judgment and everything, yes everyone in his conscience, is bound to the preacher and to his teaching, whether it be good or evil...no one may speak but the preacher, and thus the congregation is deprived and robbed of all right of judgment concerning matters of the soul, being bound exclusively to the preachers and their understanding, contrary to the word of God." Hoffman, in his early years, attacked state church leaders for not allowing their congregations to participate in the process of interpretation and discernment. He quoted a mocking jingle as their supposed motto - "we alone are right and strong; what we decree goes for the throng"<sup>12</sup>. Franklin Littell concluded that, according to the Anabaptists, "truth was not defined by an ecclesiastical monarch or secular prince. Neither was it laid out by professional scribes reading and interpreting a book. It was discovered by the whole body of the faithful"<sup>13</sup>.

There is evidence that some Reformers once held similar views on the congregation's role in hermeneutics, but later abandoned these<sup>14</sup>. In the early writings of both Luther and Zwingli, the authority of the local congregation to hear and interpret Scripture was held to limit the rights of secular authorities. But as the Reformers were abandoning this position

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<sup>11</sup>Peachey, Paul: "Answer of Some who are called (Ana)baptists why they do not attend the Churches: A Swiss Brethren Tract" MQR XLV 5.

<sup>12</sup>Deppermann, Hoffman 67, 250.

<sup>13</sup>Littell, Church 65. See also Dyck, Introduction 138; Steinmetz, Reformers 229; Harder, Lydia: "Discipleship Reexamined: Women in the Hermeneutical Community", in Huebner, Church 203.

<sup>14</sup>Ens: "Theology of the Hermeneutical Community in Anabaptist-Mennonite Thought", in Huebner, Church 76.

and accepting that these authorities should take precedence, the Anabaptists were moving in the opposite direction and denying that secular rulers had any jurisdiction on matters of biblical interpretation<sup>15</sup>. The concomitant divergence over ecclesiology ensured that only the Anabaptists would pursue the congregational approach to hermeneutics to its radical but logical conclusion. For the congregation to function as a hermeneutic community it was vital that it consisted of committed believers<sup>16</sup>, eager to obey Scripture and open to the Spirit, such as comprised Anabaptist congregations. The Reformers, who chose a gradualist approach to reform and territorial churches rather than believers' churches, lacked the kind of church communities that could have functioned in the way the Anabaptist principle of the hermeneutic community required - even if they had wanted to adopt this principle.

The Reformers' response to the subjection of Scripture to the Church within Catholicism was to set aside the Church and rely instead on the supposedly objective interpretation provided by scholars, whose interest was in the text rather than in traditions and ecclesiastical vested interests. The Anabaptists were not persuaded that theologians were adequate for this task, nor that the marginalising of the church was the solution. Their response was to replace the hierarchical church model of the Catholics with their own congregational model, and to balance the right of private interpretation, on which they insisted, with the exercise of this right in fellowship with others. It was this middle way between rampant individualism and a restrictive hierarchical model that character-

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<sup>15</sup>EBI 22, 28.

<sup>16</sup>Weaver, Becoming 118; EBI 28.



ised the Anabaptists' approach<sup>17</sup>.

### C. The Roots of the Hermeneutic Community

Various factors may have contributed to the development of the hermeneutic community within Anabaptism. Critics might suggest that the absence of theologians and competent scholars forced Anabaptists to rely on a communal method of interpretation as the only available alternative to traditional Catholicism. The hermeneutic community, according to this view, was a desperate attempt to provide coherence in a movement where individuals were prone to interpret Scripture under the supposed guidance of the Spirit without reference to the views of others.

That pragmatic factors played a part in the development of the hermeneutic community need not be discounted. In the same way, the Reformers' failure to follow through their initial enthusiasm for this practice should be attributed less to a change in principle than to their inability to establish congregations of true believers where congregational hermeneutics was possible<sup>18</sup>. But the history of Anabaptism suggests the communal emphasis was well-established in the very early years while the movement still had some scholars and theologians at its head. As the evidence below

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<sup>17</sup>Klaassen, Neither 80; Littell, Church 21; Davis: "The Origins of Anabaptism: Ascetic and Charismatic Elements Exemplifying Continuity and Discontinuity", in Lienhard, Origins 40.

<sup>18</sup>Luther, in his German Mass in 1526 described the kind of local congregation with which the Anabaptists would have been very comfortable but concluded: "I neither can nor may as yet set up such a congregation; for I do not as yet have the people for it". Verduin, citing this passage, commented that if Luther had acted on this early insight into the nature of the Church, there might have been no Anabaptist movement: see Verduin, Reformers 127. See also 73, 128-9.



indicates, locating hermeneutical authority in the congregation seems to have been a preferred option rather than a counsel of necessity.

Zwingli's influence on the early Zürich Anabaptists was surely significant here. Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz belonged to a group which met to discuss Scripture with Zwingli. He trained them in a conventicular context in which the contribution of each member was invited and regarded as significant. What Zwingli modelled in this group he also taught, that "it is not the function of one or two to expound the words of Scripture, but of all who believe in Christ"<sup>19</sup>. Elsewhere he wrote: "So when the prophets explain, the whole church should judge, that is: all of the others, whether he is doing it right or not. See, on what grounds the church should judge, or by what capacity, when she is just now hearing something she has never heard before ? Answer: by virtue of the God who dwells in them"<sup>20</sup>. This enfranchisement of the entire church and its justification on the ground that the God who indwelt each member would equip them for their hermeneutical task was the same principle on which Anabaptists based their practice.

But his more radical disciples were disappointed by the way Zwingli seemed to back away from this principle, by his readiness to accept the decisions of political authorities concerning the implications of Scrip-

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<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Carter, Reformers 67.

<sup>20</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 51-2. Pipkin and Yoder concluded that the emphasis on the gathered community in biblical interpretation was a conviction common to the entire Zwinglian Reformation, of which the Swiss Anabaptists were a part. Luther interpreted Scripture differently, restricting the "prophets" to accredited preachers: see Ens: "Theology of the Hermeneutical Community in Anabaptist-Mennonite Thought", in Huebner, Church 77.

ture passages, and by his increasing emphasis on scholarship. Given their more radical views, it is not surprising that these disciples decided to be faithful to the communal approach they had appreciated and to extend this beyond the confines of the intellectual group in Zürich to the villagers in Zollikon and elsewhere, who may have lacked education and training in theology, but who evidently shared their radical views and spiritual fervour.

The Schleithem conference in 1527 must have helped to reinforce the principle of communal hermeneutics. The leaders who met at Schleithem came from different backgrounds and with various concerns and emphases. The cohesion and advance of the variegated movement depended on their willingness and ability to reach agreement on some key issues. The success of this conference, and the formative influence of the Schleithem Confession that it produced, provided powerful testimony to the practicality and fruitfulness of a communal approach<sup>21</sup>. The leaders who met at Schleithem were convinced that the community, informed and united by the Spirit, was the final authority in questions of biblical interpretation<sup>22</sup>. This conviction shaped the congregations for which they were responsible.

The Anabaptists acknowledged Zwingli's influence but also quoted certain texts to support their congregational hermeneutics. The most popular was 1 Corinthians 14:29, together with its context, which referred to prophets speaking one by one, giving place to others rather than dominating proceedings, and to the whole church weighing what was said. This passage was fundamental to the ordering of Anabaptist congregations and the basis

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<sup>21</sup>Driver, Becoming 90.

<sup>22</sup>Snyder, Sattler 122.



for fierce criticisms of the state churches<sup>23</sup>. It supported what was variously known as "the rule of Paul"<sup>24</sup> or the "lex sedentium"<sup>25</sup>. It was used as early as 1524 by the Anabaptists. In his "Theses Against Eck" of that year, Hubmaier wrote: "the decision which of two understands it more correctly is conceived in the church by the Word of God and born out of faith. When you come together, etc, the others should judge (1 Cor 14:29)"<sup>26</sup>. On the basis of this text, Hubmaier invited Eck to debate with him before a congregation and to allow that congregation to decide which of them was speaking in line with Scripture<sup>27</sup>. Zwingli, writing against the Anabaptists, referred several times to this passage, arguing for a different interpretation of it<sup>28</sup>.

Another passage sometimes quoted was Isaiah 22, where the "key of David" is mentioned. This was understood as a key which unlocked the meaning of Scripture and was held to belong to the church<sup>29</sup>. Hoffman referred frequently to this "key of David", expressing confidence that "all words of God are of equal weight, also just and free, to him who acquires the right understanding of God and the Key of David"<sup>30</sup>. Later, Hoffman concluded that only certain inspired leaders possessed this key, but in his early days he assumed that every church member could acquire it and

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<sup>23</sup>Peachey, "Answer" 6-9.

<sup>24</sup>This was Zwingli's phrase. See Driver, Becoming 90; Yoder, in EBI 20; Brown, in MQR XLV 255.

<sup>25</sup>Among the Spiritualists. See RR 829.

<sup>26</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 51.

<sup>27</sup>EBI 21; Ens, in Huebner, Church 76.

<sup>28</sup>Pipkin, Zwingli 160, 170-1, 181; Stephens, Theology 40, 138.

<sup>29</sup>Littell, Church 21.

<sup>30</sup>AIO 148.



so participate in the congregational debate.

The Anabaptists also taught that the church possessed the "key of Peter", and referred to Matthew 16 where Peter was given authority to "bind" and to "loose". Lydia Harder commented that the Anabaptists "claimed the authority to 'bind and loose' for the congregation. This included both the authority of discerning the meaning of Scripture and the authority of disciplinary action to ensure correct teaching"<sup>31</sup>. Possession of these two "keys" by the congregation was regarded as a sure basis for interpreting Scripture.

Further texts were quoted in the testimony of an anonymous Bernese Anabaptist<sup>32</sup>. After opposing the priestly monopoly of the state clergy, he gave his definition of how a church should operate, basing this on 1 Peter 2:9, Revelation 1:6, Galatians 3:28 and the familiar 1 Corinthians 14. The picture which emerged was of a whole community of priests, in which no barriers were allowed to disenfranchise members and where all could contribute to the interpretation of Scripture.

Three theological convictions undergirded the hermeneutic community: the "theologianhood of all believers", the centrality and continuity of the Church in God's purposes, and the belief that the gathered church was the main locus of the Spirit's work. The Spirit's role was explored in an earlier section, but it is worth underlining that the hermeneutic

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<sup>31</sup>Harder, Lydia: Hermeneutic Community (Edmonton: unpublished MTh Thesis, Newman Theological College, 1984) 20.

<sup>32</sup>Springer, Nelson P: "The Testimony of a Bernese Anabaptist" MQR LX 301.

community was a charismatic community<sup>33</sup>, and that the confidence Anabaptist leaders placed in it was rooted in their expectancy that the Spirit would operate there in a way He would not within individuals alone.

Rideman, for example, wrote that "the church is gathered together by the Holy Spirit", and that this Spirit-led church was "the basis and ground of truth"<sup>34</sup>. This was not the Church sitting in authority over Scripture but the Church as the Spirit's chosen location for interpreting Scripture.

A further factor was the Anabaptists' conviction that their persecuted congregations were more akin to the New Testament churches than any other body in the sixteenth century<sup>35</sup>. They believed they were in a good position to interpret Scripture within their gatherings because their congregations shared the life situation and perspectives of the early Christians, in a way which those in positions of power and security could not<sup>36</sup>. In effect, centuries before the appropriate terms were used, they were convinced that this enabled their horizon to be fused with the horizon of the biblical text, in that their congregations were a point of real contact with the church in the first century. Their concern was to interpret Scripture in a way that was meaningful in their situation, believing that this would be a faithful interpretation of Scripture, because their situation was in genuine continuity with the early churches. Their hermeneutic, therefore, was ecclesiocentric, not only in that they gave the congregation a crucial role in interpreting Scripture, but also in that any interpretation needed to be judged by its usefulness to the

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<sup>33</sup>See Steinmetz, Reformers 229.

<sup>34</sup>AIO 112.

<sup>35</sup>Kreider, "Servant" 9.

<sup>36</sup>Stayer, Anabaptists 128.



congregation.

Cornelius Krahn referred to Menno's "ecclesio-centric approach to the Scriptures"<sup>37</sup>, by which he meant that the relevance of an interpretation to the congregation was a determining factor in assessing its correctness. Similarly Douglas Shantz described Dirk Phillips' interpretation as "a hermeneutic of the pure church", concluding that his "ecclesiological concern served as a presupposition to shape and govern his understanding and application of the Scriptures"<sup>38</sup>. The Reformers' interpretations were circumscribed by certain doctrinal presuppositions. Among Anabaptists, restrictions related to ecclesiological and ethical matters. Scripture was perceived as being concerned primarily with the ordering and mission of the Church<sup>39</sup>, so it was interpreted in the light of Anabaptist beliefs about the nature of the Church to which Scripture pointed<sup>40</sup>. This involved them in a form of the "hermeneutical circle", in that the congregation both shaped and was shaped by the way in which Scripture was interpreted in order to produce a congregation that was true to their understanding of biblical ecclesiology. The congregation was, therefore, the testing ground for interpreting Scripture, because it was here that the practical outworkings of any suggested interpretations could be assessed.

The "theologianhood of all believers" (not an Anabaptist phrase but an attempt to indicate how they developed the Reformers' concept of the

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<sup>37</sup>Krahn, Dutch 198.

<sup>38</sup>Shantz, "Ecclesiological" 117.

<sup>39</sup>Kasdorf, Hans: "The Anabaptist Approach to Mission", in Shenk, Anabaptism 69.

<sup>40</sup>See Shantz, "Ecclesiological" 117-8.



"priesthood of all believers" more radically<sup>41</sup>) was also related to the Spirit's role, in that the leaders believed that the Spirit would provide for believers whatever they lacked in terms of education and theological expertise. The hermeneutic community, therefore, was comprised of these "theologians" (indeed it was the only approach to hermeneutics that could possibly include illiterate theologians<sup>42</sup>) and could anticipate, in line with Jesus' promise in Matthew 18, a special anointing of the Spirit because they were gathered together as the people of God.

Statements about the priesthood of all believers, the freedom of all believers to weigh the words of the preacher, the significance of 1 Corinthians 14:29, and the limited role of ecclesiastical or secular authorities in the interpretation of Scripture can all be found in the Reformers' writings. But only among the Anabaptists, who pursued a vision of congregational life that the Reformers had glimpsed but dismissed as unrealisable, did these principles lead to the development of hermeneutic communities.

#### D. Congregational Hermeneutics in Practice

Although Anabaptist writings offer little theoretical reflection on the principle of congregational hermeneutics, there are indications of how this principle was implemented. The main sources of information are accounts of congregational meetings, statements by Anabaptist leaders of their desire to have their own teachings weighed in the congregations, and conclusions of synodal proceedings. It is important to heed Adolf Ens'

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<sup>41</sup>Brown, "Radical" 255.

<sup>42</sup>Klaassen, Neither 42.

warning that, in gathering this evidence, "one is tempted to combine all the scattered bits and pieces from the various writers cited and create an outline of the process of an Anabaptist congregation functioning as hermeneutical community. Yet such a construct would be artificial. No historical group would likely have thought of itself in that way or functioned in that precise manner"<sup>43</sup>. This is particularly true of first generation groups, where they were clear that the congregation was the locus of interpretation, but the practicalities were still being worked out and were far from being systematised.

Here the evidence will be gathered without attempting to impose artificial uniformity upon the movement. However, as Ens himself acknowledged<sup>44</sup>, this was not an aspect of hermeneutics where the Anabaptists exhibited great variety. There were some who placed greater stress on the Spirit in the individual, like Hut or Denck<sup>45</sup>, or who tended to restrict interpretation to a trusted group, such as Hoffman in his latter years<sup>46</sup>, and certain groups in Frisia and the northern parts of the Netherlands whom he may have influenced<sup>47</sup>. But the importance of the congregation in interpretation was clearly acknowledged throughout the movement and throughout the sixteenth century<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup>Ens: "Theology of the Hermeneutical Community in Anabaptist-Mennonite Thought", in Huebner, Church 85.

<sup>44</sup>Ens: "Theology of the Hermeneutical Community in Anabaptist-Mennonite Thought", in Huebner 69.

<sup>45</sup>EBI 54-5.

<sup>46</sup>Deppermann, Klaus: "Melchior Hoffman and Strasbourg Anabaptism", in Lienhard, Origins 218.

<sup>47</sup>RR 398.

<sup>48</sup>See Clasen, Anabaptism 91.



## 1) Congregational Practice

The Swiss tract referred to above criticised state churches for their dominance by one preacher. "When someone comes to church and constantly hears only one person speaking, and all the listeners are silent, neither speaking nor prophesying, who can or will regard or confess the same to be a spiritual congregation?" the authors asked, "or confess according to I Cor 14 that God is dwelling and operating in them through his Holy Spirit with his gifts, impelling them one after the other in the above mentioned order of speaking and prophesying?"<sup>49</sup> It is clear from this document that Anabaptist congregations expected many people to participate, using the gifts they had received. The meetings were structured loosely enough to enable this to happen<sup>50</sup>.

Indeed, not only was participation allowed, it was required of members if they had a contribution to make: "A listener is bound by Christian love (if something to edification is given or revealed to him) that he should and may speak of it also in the congregation, and again thereupon be silent"<sup>51</sup>. The truth would emerge from various contributions as the congregation weighed what was said by different speakers and was led by the Spirit into a consensus. It appears from this tract, and from other sources<sup>52</sup>, that contributions might include reading texts of Scripture,

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<sup>49</sup>Peachey, "Answer" 7. See also Springer, "Testimony" 301; AIO 119.

<sup>50</sup>Durnbaugh, Donald: Every Need Supplied (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974) 11.

<sup>51</sup>Durnbaugh, Every 6.

<sup>52</sup>Dyck, Introduction 137-8; van der Zijpp: "The Early Dutch Anabaptists", in Hershberger, Recovery 71. See also references in the section on the Spirit in the congregation.



expounding these, asking questions, answering these questions, prophesying and discussing what had been said.

In his "Seven Articles", Marpeck's colleague, Scharnschlager, described an order of service in which members stood in turn to read, prophesy and discuss Scripture<sup>53</sup>. Spitalmaier wrote: "When they come together they teach each other the divine Word and one asks the others: how do you understand this saying?"<sup>54</sup> Sattler, too, explained how the Anabaptists studied Scripture together: "When brothers and sisters are together, they shall take up something to read together. The one to whom God has given the best understanding shall explain it, the others should be still and listen"<sup>55</sup>. It is difficult to imagine a greater contrast to the monologues of preachers in the state churches.

These congregational gatherings were not without leadership, but the leader's task was to guide rather than dominate, to act as umpire rather than sole participant<sup>56</sup>. This was different from the role of state church pastors. Calvin, for example, strongly emphasised the teaching office he had received as qualifying him to teach and to maintain his interpretation against others. Menno agreed that teachers were needed in the Church, but he did not expect them to dominate proceedings and always to have the hermeneutical answers<sup>57</sup>. Hubmaier wanted scholars involved in the churches

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<sup>53</sup>RR 795.

<sup>54</sup>AIO 124.

<sup>55</sup>Yoder, Legacy 44. Arnold Snyder has questioned Sattler's authorship of this document, but it certainly represents the early Anabaptist approach to meeting together.

<sup>56</sup>EBI 22; Clasen, Anabaptism 51, 91.

<sup>57</sup>EBI 67-8.

to help with technical details, such as the correct way to translate passages, and to explain how passages had been interpreted by others. He himself had an extensive collection of patristic writings on various topics. But he was not willing for these scholars to override other members of the congregation<sup>58</sup>. In groups relating to Marpeck, leadership was regarded as a gift and allowed to operate freely for the benefit of all, but leaders remained subject to the authority of the community<sup>59</sup>. Franklin Littell concluded that the Anabaptist practice of choosing leaders from the congregation, who were normally untrained and paid only by voluntary contributions, meant that "no special class of professionals was to be allowed to diminish the sovereignty of the community of believers in matters of faith and order"<sup>60</sup>.

Travelling leaders, such as Hut and Denck, and congregational leaders who were theologically trained, like Hubmaier, were inevitably respected as teachers. In practice, therefore, their contributions would carry great weight and might discourage contributions from others who thought differently on matters. But the readiness of such leaders to submit to the process of corporate discernment, as instanced below, ensured that this did not undercut the basic congregational principle<sup>61</sup>. There was no requirement that every contribution carried the same weight, but it was important that every contribution was weighed. The primary task of

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<sup>58</sup>EBI 21.

<sup>59</sup>Klassen, Covenant 84; Harder, Hermeneutic 17.

<sup>60</sup>Littell, Church 91.

<sup>61</sup>N van der Zijpp concluded that "although the leaders...had a genuine influence on the course of affairs, their views and ideas were not obligatory for the congregation": van der Zijpp: "The Early Dutch Anabaptists", in Hershberger, Recovery 69. See also Verduin, Reformers 156; Friedmann, Theology 36-7.



congregational leaders was to ensure that Scripture was being read and that, through the contributions of all members, it was being understood and applied. The appellation "servant of the Word" given by some Anabaptists to their leaders<sup>62</sup> seems fitting, emphasising the authority of Scripture and the serving, rather than dominating, role of the leader. Melchior Rinck taught this view of leadership in the congregations he influenced - that the congregations were competent to decide questions of faith and practice, and that leaders were not to make decisions for them, but to be servants of the congregation<sup>63</sup>. When this kind of leadership operated properly, the congregation was enabled to move beyond authoritarianism, anarchy and even democracy towards the goal of consensus under the authority of the Word and the Spirit.

## 2) Open to Correction

Anabaptist leaders frequently encouraged their hearers or readers to search Scripture for themselves to see if what was being taught was correct. Although some of these statements might be dismissed as merely rhetorical, their repetition in debates with opponents and the obvious sincerity of many of these statements indicates that they meant what they said. And these leaders often acknowledged that their convictions had emerged out of a group process rather than independently<sup>64</sup>. Hubmaier, for example, urged such testing of the leaders' teaching, writing that "each individual should judge by the Scriptures if he is rightly provided food

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<sup>62</sup>Littell, Church 121.

<sup>63</sup>Oyer, Lutheran 94.

<sup>64</sup>EBI 29.



and drink by his pastor"<sup>65</sup>.

Marpeck appealed several times to readers of his "Admonition" to check his teaching against their own study and understanding of Scripture. He wrote, "we will study the Scriptures, and commend our results to the judgment of every well-meaning person. According to the capacity of his faith, let each man see whether or not it is so"<sup>66</sup>. In other contexts, this appeal might suggest individual study, but among the Anabaptists this was inextricably linked with discussion together. Similarly, in "Judgment and Decision", he wrote, "I gladly submit my mind to a more clear and lucid understanding, which is given by the Holy Spirit, and I would gladly also submit to the least among Christ's own...If I am in error, I desire to be taught by God, through his Holy Spirit and the Scriptures. If I testify to the truth (by grace), I desire confirmation of it from those who truly believe"<sup>67</sup>. Noteworthy here are Marpeck's inclusion of "the least among Christ's own" in the hermeneutical community, his belief that any believer could be the Spirit's mouthpiece in confirming or challenging his own understanding of Scripture, and the balance he attempted to strike between the triumvirate of Spirit, Scripture and congregation that dominated Anabaptist hermeneutics.

Menno displayed similar openness to correction and further revelation. In his "Brief and Clear Confession", he asked his readers: "If you have plainer Scriptures concerning this article of the incarnation of Christ;

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<sup>65</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 33.

<sup>66</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 204. See also 177 and 179 for similar passages.

<sup>67</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 313.

if you have a clearer basis, plainer truth, or clearer proof than we have, then assist us, and I will by the grace of God change my mind in regard to this matter and accept your view"<sup>68</sup>. Again, in "A Clear Account of Excommunication", he urged, "I could wish, most beloved brethren, seeing that we have given our interpretation of these afore-mentioned words of Christ, that every Christian would diligently examine whether Paul does not (1 Cor 5) understand them in precisely the same way"<sup>69</sup>. For Menno, the prerequisites for biblical interpretation were "a willingness to be instructed both by the Spirit and by the brethren"<sup>70</sup>.

Sattler, in a letter to Capito and Bucer, wrote: "As I recently spoke to you in brotherly moderation and friendliness on certain points, which I together with my brothers and sisters have understood out of Scripture..."<sup>71</sup> Sattler claimed his convictions had been formed in fellowship with others, rather than through personal Bible study. Interestingly, he included "sisters" also in this interpretive process, one of several

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<sup>68</sup>Menno, Works 452.

<sup>69</sup>Menno, Works 468.

<sup>70</sup>Ens: "Theology of the Hermeneutical Community in Anabaptist-Mennonite Thought", in Huebner, Church 80.

<sup>71</sup>Yoder, Legacy 21.



indications<sup>72</sup> that women participated actively in Anabaptist gatherings.

Another example of openness to correction and further insight is provided by an important early document, the "Discipline of the Believers: How a Christian is to Live", the earliest extant congregational order, written, probably in 1527, by Hans Schlaffer for the congregation at Rattenberg. It stated: "We have unanimously agreed that this ordnung shall be kept among us by all the brethren and sisters. When, however, a brother or sister is able to produce a better ordnung it shall be accepted from him at any time". This was supported by reference to I Corinthians 14<sup>73</sup>.

This openness to correction extended occasionally beyond the confines of the congregation, although it was in the congregation that such insights were tested. In his correspondence with Schwenckfeld, Marpeck referred to the charge that Anabaptist congregations were instructed only by their own teachers and that this was a restriction on Christian freedom (this charge could only have been brought by Spiritualists as the state churches were even more restricted to approved preachers). Marpeck offered to give an opportunity to "anyone who will more fully instruct us" and said that whoever comes to teach or to discuss "will find us open, this being God's

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<sup>72</sup>See also Yoder, "Bible Study" ME Vol V 79; Menno, Works 643; van der Zijpp: "The Early Dutch Anabaptists", in Hershberger, Recovery 71; Kobelt-Groch, Marion: "Why did Petronella leave her husband ? Reflections on Marital Avoidance among the Halberstadt Anabaptists" MQR LXII 40; RR xxx, 507; Schaufele, Wolfgang: "The Missionary Vision and Activity of the Anabaptist Laity", in Shenk, Anabaptism 79; MM 516; Barrett, "Women's" 7-10; but cf Clasen, Anabaptism 207. On the significance of the hermeneutical community for the ministry of women, see Harder, Lydia: "Discipleship Reexamined: Women in the Hermeneutical Community", in Huebner, Church 203; and Harder, Lydia: "Hermeneutic Community - A Feminist Challenge" in Koontz, Perspectives 46ff.

<sup>73</sup>Friedmann, Hutterite 215.



will"<sup>74</sup>. It is doubtful whether such exchanges often took place, but Marpeck's openness to this was a consequence of trusting the congregation to discern truth and error and of a stance that remained open to fresh revelation, even from unexpected sources.

### 3) Translocal Practice

The various confessions which emerged within early Anabaptism were invariably the result of group consensus rather than the work of one leader<sup>75</sup>, and they were frequently presented as open to correction and development. Just as they were wary of past creeds which might bind biblical interpretation, so the Anabaptists avoided according creedal authority to their own confessions. As Norman Kraus wrote, "Anabaptist confessions of faith are not viewed as universal, orthodox or dogmatic statements of the gospel. They are rather statements of the working consensus of the group, and they are open to revision by ongoing consensus"<sup>76</sup>. Menno, in particular, was very concerned lest any creed or confession should come to function as a test of faith among the Anabaptists and so distract them from Scripture<sup>77</sup>.

It is in this light that the Schleithem Confession should be viewed, not as the product of one theologian, or even of one group within Anabaptism; not as an authoritative statement from ordained leaders which was to be accepted; not as a summary of beliefs which were independent of local

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<sup>74</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 374.

<sup>75</sup>Redekop, Calvin: "Anabaptism and the Ethnic Ghost" MQR LVIII 135.

<sup>76</sup>Kraus, Evangelicalism 180. See also Estep, Anabaptist 130.

<sup>77</sup>Estep, Anabaptist 133; Keeney, Dutch 39.

congregations. Rather, this Confession expressed the shared convictions of certain representative leaders within the movement<sup>78</sup>. Its authority was spiritual and personal, rather than legal or hierarchical. Its influence within Anabaptism was the result of the esteem in which those who contributed to it were held, but it was not assumed to be the last word on the subjects it dealt with. The spirit of the Confession, and of the covering letter by Sattler, were quite different from this. The Confession was offered as an aid to local congregations and as the outcome of a meeting of minds and hearts, previously in disagreement but now united by the Spirit.

Schleitheim was followed by other important translocal gatherings, at Teufen and Augsburg, in the following year, in which this communal approach was reinforced<sup>79</sup>. The importance of these translocal meetings was both as models for local congregations and as demonstrations that the movement's leaders operated on the same principles when they met as congregational representatives as they did in their own congregations. No one leader or theologian dominated these synods any more than one leader was allowed to dominate the local congregation.

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<sup>78</sup>This is clear from the low key subtitle of the Confession - "Brotherly Union of a Number of Children of God Concerning Seven Articles": Yoder, Schleitheim 7.

<sup>79</sup>EBI 23-4.

## E. Evaluation

One criticism of congregational hermeneutics relates to the definition of the congregation itself. The Anabaptists were committed to an ecclesiology that guaranteed substantial local autonomy. They were antagonistic to hierarchical arrangements whereby creeds, traditions and professional leaders were imposed on local congregations. Their own leaders were chosen by local congregation and accountable to them. Those with travelling ministries were not seen as exercising authority over the congregations, but as serving them in various ways as they moved around. Each congregation, therefore, was responsible for making its own decisions on matters of doctrine, conduct and biblical interpretation. A potential weakness in this situation was the tendency to fragmentation, disagreement and incoherence. If each congregation was hermeneutically autonomous, and each claimed the anointing of the Spirit, who was to judge matters ?

Anabaptism was troubled by divisions, some quite bitter, and issues of interpretation were often at stake<sup>1</sup>. The conferences that brought together representative leaders, such as those at Schleithem and Augsburg, were prompted by disagreements and confusion rather than more positive factors. Dutch Anabaptism, in particular, was split by disagreements over how certain biblical practices should be interpreted and applied. With no hierarchy able to enforce a particular understanding of Scripture, various groups resorted to excommunicating en masse other groups with whom they disagreed<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Keeney, Dutch 194; Stayer, Anabaptists 168;RR 795.

<sup>2</sup>AIO 141.



William Keeney considered this problem in some detail in his treatment of Dutch Anabaptism. He concluded that, in the early years, there was considerable confidence that personal contact between leaders could resolve such differences, but that as the groups multiplied this became less feasible. Dirk Philips, especially, recognised this and attempted to work out solutions, but the continuing conflicts within the movement indicate that no satisfactory solution was found. Keeney suggested that neither Dirk nor Menno fully appreciated the difficulty of finding an objective test for interpretations, when the ultimate appeal was not to the letter of Scripture alone, but to the voice of the Spirit in the congregations<sup>3</sup>. Rothmann held that there were marks by which interpretations could be checked for accuracy: an interpretation was reliable if it led to behaviour that conformed to Christ<sup>4</sup>. However, Rothmann's involvement in the Munster episode, with its behaviour that seemed unChristlike to most Anabaptists, showed this ethical filter had limitations.

It is difficult to assess the force of this criticism. Some of their contemporaries used these divisions as evidence that Anabaptism was in error<sup>5</sup>. Those who believed hermeneutics was best retained for trained theologians could find much evidence to support their conclusion. Reliance on the Spirit to bring revelation and unity seemed at times a vain hope.

But there was, despite these serious problems, a remarkable unity and coherence across the movement. Differences in emphasis, strong and

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<sup>3</sup>Keeney, Dutch 41.

<sup>4</sup>AIO 141.

<sup>5</sup>Loewen, Harry: Luther and the Radicals (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Publications, 1974) 22.

impatient leaders, cultural variations, and the pressure of severe persecution all threatened to tear Anabaptism apart. But it survived, albeit battered and bloodied, and left a legacy that can be legitimately described as the Anabaptist vision. The convictions of numerous small congregations and individuals across Europe in the early sixteenth century were not codified and systematised in the way that their Lutheran and Reformed counterparts preserved their own convictions. But, once allowance is made for a range of ideas and emphases on various issues, a distinctive contribution to theology, ethics and ecclesiology emerges from the Anabaptist hermeneutic communities.

Reliance on the Spirit and confidence that Scripture was clear enough for a consensus to emerge without the presence of trained scholars were principles which undergirded congregational hermeneutics. The mistakes, disagreements and poor interpretations which sometimes resulted can either be seen as inevitable consequences of unrealistic optimism, or as unavoidable given the human weaknesses that are inherent in any method of interpreting Scripture. Anabaptist leaders may have underestimated the problems which might arise, but it seems that they regarded these as less serious than those they regarded as inevitably associated with other hermeneutical systems currently available.

Some leaders were very conscious of the need to provide some measure of guidance for their congregations and to meet with other leaders to reach agreement on key issues. The influence of Anabaptist leaders may not have been official but it was substantial. An argument cannot be sustained that



this influence reduced the role of the congregation to insignificance<sup>6</sup>, but there is no doubt that wise and experienced leaders, as well as fiery and persuasive visionaries, provided general directions and aids to interpretation for the congregations. The synods were benchmarks against which to measure the interpretations of the local congregations, even though there was freedom to disagree and, in the last analysis, no arbitrator over what a congregation believed to be the Spirit's voice. In the chosen absence of such an authoritative interpreter, individual or corporate, beyond the local congregation, Anabaptists accepted a measure of flexibility and diversity. It appears they regarded this a price worth paying for freedom from external control and the binding influence of creeds and traditions<sup>7</sup>.

Another criticism of congregational hermeneutics is that it is simply a pooling of ignorance. A dozen illiterate believers will be no more effective interpreters together than as individuals, it is argued. The Anabaptist response to this would emphasise that interpretation was a matter of listening to the Spirit and of reading (or hearing read) the Bible which is simple enough for all to understand, at least in part. Sharing together enabled each to share insights that the Spirit gave to

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<sup>6</sup>Franklin Littell asserted that, as early as the second decade of the movement, "inspired leadership and novel interpretations had largely disappeared. Both organisational and creedal conformity were strictly enforced": Littell, Church 37. But Littell provided no sixteenth century evidence to demonstrate this.

<sup>7</sup>The gradual erosion in the latter part of the sixteenth century and beyond of this flexibility and diversity in favour of conformity and harmony between congregations may have been a sensible development in terms of the survival of the movement, but it resulted in the draining away of much of the genius of early Anabaptism.



all believers. Discussing these together and seeking a consensus would help them to discard unreliable and erroneous interpretations, as well as confirming those that seemed helpful and trustworthy. Furthermore, the Spirit's presence was promised in a special way when the congregation met together.

In practice, they recognised that the level of contribution would vary from person to person, and that some would have little to contribute<sup>8</sup>. The hermeneutic community was surely as prone to domination by strong and vocal characters, and by those with more experience or education, as any other human grouping. But its strength was its refusal to exclude even the weakest members, on the grounds that the Spirit was available to all. The ploughboy might sometimes understand a text of Scripture better than a theologian<sup>9</sup>.

It may be, however, that although the weakest members were not excluded, in practice scholarship was. It was noted above that Hubmaier welcomed the contribution that experts could bring in certain areas. However, there were few scholars or theologians committed to the Anabaptist cause, so many congregations, especially in rural areas, were unable to draw on such resources. Even where scholars were available, the pervasive suspicion of

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<sup>8</sup>Clasen, Anabaptism 91 suggested that in practice the Anabaptists did restrict the liberty of all members to participate but he acknowledged that throughout the sixteenth century the right of all present to speak was recognised.

<sup>9</sup>Klaus Deppermann wrote: "If the authority for preaching comes not from scholarship but from possessing the Spirit of God, and if the Spirit is given primarily to the 'poor and simple', then a new understanding of the congregation is called for": Deppermann, Hoffman 66.

scholarship within the movement hindered their expertise being used within the congregations. Education was perceived as a greater hindrance to interpreting Scripture than ignorance. Whether through necessity or prejudice, early Anabaptism failed to draw on theological and intellectual resources which could have enhanced the ability of its congregations to engage in effective hermeneutics. Their practice provides a challenging example of the hermeneutical competence of untrained believers, and a warning against the danger of relying on scholars whose expertise is not tested in a congregational setting, but the possibility of a congregation functioning with scholars as an integral and trusted component in its hermeneutical task was not adequately explored.

A further limitation on the Anabaptist model of congregational hermeneutics was the virtual exclusion of the Church throughout prior centuries<sup>10</sup>. The focus was so clearly on present consensus that little attention was given to past consensus. This was one of Calvin's major criticisms as he considered the Anabaptists' hermeneutical practice<sup>11</sup>. In their desire to be free of binding traditions, and because of their view that the Church "fell" at the time of Constantine, if not earlier, Anabaptists did not draw much on the wisdom of earlier Christians. Although the Reformers acknowledged that the Church needed reformation, they did not place its "fall" as early as the Anabaptists, nor did they regard the corruption as so extreme as to require restitution rather than reformation. It seems that the Anabaptists' view of the fall of humanity was generally less radical than that of the Reformers but their view of the fall of the

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<sup>10</sup>Klassen, Covenant 164.

<sup>11</sup>Balke, Calvin 327.



Church was more radical<sup>12</sup>. This understanding of Church history naturally discouraged exploration of earlier writings.

It is arguable, however, that this omission, while it may have released Anabaptists from dependence on past authorities to make fresh discoveries that were appropriate for their own generation and circumstances in a way that was unlikely to be achieved by those who gave great deference to the past consensus, impoverished their interpretation and deprived them of much scholarly and spiritual counsel. In particular, their ignorance of pre-Constantinian writers prevented them discovering how many of these held to interpretations of Scripture broadly similar to their own. It seems also that adopting an ecclesiology which in practice disenfranchised all but the present generation of Christians was unjustified and rather arrogant.

The Anabaptists' marginalisation of past creeds and authorities contains an important warning. Over-dependence on such sources can stymie and distort the present task of interpretation and hinder Christians from grappling with Scripture and relying on the Spirit to apply it to the present situation<sup>13</sup>. But it is unnecessary so completely to jettison the contribution of earlier generations to achieve this freedom<sup>14</sup>. Just as present scholars can be welcomed as contributors without being allowed to

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<sup>12</sup>On the Anabaptists' understanding of Constantinianism, see below at pp332ff.

<sup>13</sup>Janzen, Waldemar: "A Canonical Rethinking of the Anabaptist-Mennonite New Testament Orientation", in Huebner, Church 105.

<sup>14</sup>Driver, John: Becoming God's Community (Elgin, Illinois: The Brethren Press, 1981) 90.



dominate the discussion, so past interpreters can be consulted without being accorded a respect that prevents their conclusions being challenged and set aside<sup>15</sup>. Anabaptist radicalism demolished what they perceived as a significant obstacle to faithful and relevant biblical interpretation, but they failed to conserve what was good and helpful. Ironically, their ecclesiology contained a mandate for making use of these past resources without allowing them to tyrannise the congregation, had this ecclesiology been seen to include the people of God throughout history rather than only in the present generation<sup>16</sup>.

A further criticism relates to the ecclesiocentricity of this hermeneutic community. Where the focus is on building faithful congregations and the interpretation of Scripture is geared to this end, there is a risk of devaluing or misunderstanding biblical passages dealing with the wider community, with issues of government, justice and social relationships. The Anabaptists believed that some parts of Scripture, especially the Old Testament, applied to those "outside the perfection of Christ", but this essentially negative perception precluded them from exploring the implications of these texts<sup>17</sup>. They tended to concentrate on texts which seemed more immediately relevant to the task of building local congregations. It is certainly understandable, given their powerlessness in society, that the Anabaptists may have seen little point in developing biblical

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<sup>15</sup>Janzen: "A Canonical Rethinking of the Anabaptist-Mennonite New Testament Orientation", in Huebner, Church 110.

<sup>16</sup>Reimer, A James: "The Authority of the Scriptures" CGR Spring 1986) 139-40.

<sup>17</sup>Holland (Hermeneutics 129) criticised Rideman on these grounds, arguing that he "consistently overdraws the doctrine of the pure church and the principles of separation."

perspectives on a society they could do little to influence directly and therefore gave their attention to passages which helped them build an alternative society.

The Anabaptists, because they were concerned with believers and would-be disciples, were prepared to face the radical challenge of certain texts in a way that the Reformers, who were trying to develop a hermeneutic for a whole civil society, were not. Their ecclesiocentricity allowed the texts to speak and to be applied, at least within the church community, even if they failed to develop a hermeneutic that enabled the application of Scripture to civil society. The Reformers chose an approach which widened the scope of Scripture but tended to dilute its challenge. The Anabaptists opted for a restricted scope but a determined effort to apply it without evading its radical message. The hermeneutic community was both the locus and focus of their interpretation of Scripture and of their attempt to implement its radical message.

There were significant weaknesses, then in this congregational approach to hermeneutics, but also important strengths. The fact that it was a comparative novelty<sup>18</sup> meant that the Anabaptists had little to guide them as they pioneered this practice. That they made mistakes and failed to deal adequately with certain weaknesses is not surprising. But this admittedly imperfect system<sup>19</sup> contained many valuable elements, most of which have been indicated in the above discussion.

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<sup>18</sup>EBI 21.

<sup>19</sup>Jeschke, Marlin: "How Mennonites Have Done and Should Do Theology", in Swartley, Willard (ed): Explorations of Systematic Theology (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984) 13.



Two should be underlined in concluding this section. A crucial element safeguarded by the Anabaptists was the conviction that every member of the congregation could contribute to the task of understanding and applying Scripture<sup>20</sup>. Another element that set the Anabaptists apart in their generation was their openness to correction<sup>21</sup>. Their concern to discover the truth and readiness to listen to anyone who was under the authority of Scripture, and their willingness to consider fresh ways of thinking rather than merely squeezing texts into conformity with set creeds, present a continuing challenge to any interpretive system tempted to sacrifice openness to restrictive practices.

One further important point was made by Millard Lind: "The concept of the hermeneutical community includes also an epistemological dimension"<sup>22</sup>. His point was that locating hermeneutics in a communal setting affirmed the Bible as a public book, written for communities rather than individuals. Interpretation was concerned with the Bible's meaning for believers in their relationship together and their corporate life and witness in society. It was not concerned merely or primarily with the needs and aspirations of individual believers. The Anabaptist claim that the local congregation was the contemporary equivalent of the early churches and, thus, the main point of contact where the biblical and contemporary horizons could be fused<sup>23</sup>, made possible an adequate hermeneutics, rather than a retreat into a rootless, devotional approach that failed to do

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<sup>20</sup>EBI 21.

<sup>21</sup>AIO 302.

<sup>22</sup>EBI 153.

<sup>23</sup>On this, see further below at pp429ff.



justice to Scripture and failed to engage with the contemporary situation.

The hermeneutic community was arguably the most radical and significant aspect of Anabaptist hermeneutics. It represented a different basis for biblical interpretation and evaluation of interpretations from that used by their contemporaries and many interpreters before and since. Other features of Anabaptist hermeneutics - encouraging everyone to interpret Scripture, relying on the Spirit, emphasising obedience rather than education, and focusing on the New Testament - made more sense within this congregational framework. The contemporary significance of Anabaptist hermeneutics, to be explored below, is vitally related to an appreciation of the radical alternative that this communal approach to hermeneutics represents, and the consequences to which it leads.

### A. Introduction

In earlier sections, the Anabaptists' concern about the practical consequences of biblical interpretation has been evident. Their divergence from the Reformers frequently owed more to their dissatisfaction with the implications and outworkings of the Reformers' hermeneutics than to the Reformers' interpretive principles, although this led, not unnaturally, to the conclusion that the principles themselves must be deficient if they produced such results.

This section will explore the Anabaptists' focus on ethical factors as both a prerequisite for interpretation and as a means of evaluating the accuracy of interpretations. It will include also a consideration of a number of suggested definitions of the Anabaptist approach to hermeneutics which are related to this ethical focus.

### B. Interpretation and Application

The Anabaptists were often concerned about interpretation being divorced from application. Their suspicion of theology and theologians was based not only on the fear that education and an intellectual approach tended to distort biblical interpretation, but also on the belief that too much emphasis was placed on attaining a theoretical understanding of Scripture and too little on putting this into practice<sup>1</sup>. Theological brilliance was, in their eyes, no substitute for faithful obedience<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Friedmann, Theology 19-20.

<sup>2</sup>Balke, Calvin 207.

A common feature of debates between Anabaptists and Reformers, and of interrogations of captured Anabaptists, was the accusation that the Reformation had failed ethically. The Anabaptists were unimpressed by the quality of life in the state churches, and by the Reformers' stance on many ethical issues<sup>3</sup>. They concluded that there must be a deficiency in the way Scripture was being used if such poor fruit was being produced. The Reformers argued that sound doctrine was the basis for Christian lifestyle<sup>4</sup>; but the Anabaptists remained unconvinced that the Reformers' teaching was resulting in true discipleship. Either the process was taking a very long time, or the doctrine was not as sound as it was claimed to be, or the emphasis on doctrine rather than lifestyle was at fault.

Perhaps this concern influenced early Anabaptist leaders who were theologically competent to emphasise the simplicity and clarity of Scripture.

Their writings show that they appreciated there were problems associated with interpreting Scripture, and they provided guidelines to assist their members. But the emphasis on clarity was intentional and, they believed, realistic and vital. Emphasising the difficulties involved in interpreting Scripture was a disincentive to obeying it, they argued, for the focus was

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<sup>3</sup>Alfred Coutts wrote that from the Anabaptists' perspective, "the orthodox Reformation, with its new Church and its new creed, had been a failure in the sphere of practical morals": Coutts, Denck 11.

<sup>4</sup>Although several Reformers acknowledged the low moral state of their congregations with considerable dismay and were pessimistic about the possibility of improving it. See Shiels & Wood, Voluntary 141. Zwingli's response to the challenge of the Anabaptists' committed congregations with their acknowledged high moral standards was often to dismiss these publicly as unrealistic for the state churches, but on at least one occasion he wrote, somewhat wistfully, "Would that we had such a church !": see Stephens, Theology 298.



on understanding rather than application, and uncertainties about the meaning of certain texts encouraged hesitation and caution rather than bold and radical action. Emphasising that, whatever the difficulties, much of Scripture was easy to understand and needed simply to be obeyed, rather than endlessly debated, removed what the Anabaptists regarded as excuses for compromise, delay and inaction. Their conviction was that Scripture was difficult to apply, because of its costly challenge, but that it was generally not difficult to understand.

Some Anabaptist statements must be interpreted in the light of their frustration with the way the Reformers seemed to them to be wriggling away from the more radical challenges of Scripture under cover of discussions about the precise meaning of certain texts<sup>5</sup>. Menno, for example, wrote: "The Scriptures do not need interpretation; they need only to be obeyed"<sup>6</sup>. Elsewhere Menno discussed issues of interpretation, so this comment should be seen, not as an example of extreme biblicism, but as a polemical statement aimed at those he suspected of evading obedience to Scripture by majoring on interpretation rather than application.

The Anabaptists' decision to locate interpretive authority in the congregation should be understood similarly. A perceived problem with leaving biblical interpretation to academics was that they were poorly placed to

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<sup>5</sup>Oyer, Lutheran 212.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Loewen, One 16.

test the validity of their conclusions<sup>7</sup>. Although they might be experts in linguistics, theology and church history, their interpretative context was often theoretical rather than practical. The hermeneutic community was better placed to test out the adequacy of interpretations in its communal life, worship and witness to society. Theologians could share in this only insofar as they functioned as members of this hermeneutic community.

The emphasis within communal hermeneutics, as practised by Anabaptists, was on application rather than interpretation<sup>8</sup>. Evidence of Anabaptist sermons<sup>9</sup> suggests that they concentrated more on ethical issues and the application of Scripture than on issues of doctrine. This emphasis can be documented from many Anabaptists. Marpeck assured would-be interpreters that "if anyone seeks to do the truth...God will see to it that he truly finds it"<sup>10</sup>. The key to hermeneutics was not intellectual ability but a readiness to apply Scripture to one's own life. William Klassen summarised Marpeck's approach thus: "Life was a unit and the scriptures were to be studied only for the purpose of applying them"<sup>11</sup>. Undoubtedly, the Reformers would have agreed with this statement, but Marpeck's concern was that they were not in fact consistently joining application to interpretation. A division seemed to exist between the scholar or preacher who

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<sup>7</sup>The argument here is not that meaning equals obedience, but that the inadequacy of many suggested interpretations can be discovered once an attempt is made to work out the practical implications. What seemed correct in the study may be found to be both impractical and theoretically flawed once it is exposed to the harsh test of practical experience.

<sup>8</sup>Ens, Adolf: "Theology of the Hermeneutical Community in Anabaptist-Mennonite Thought", in Huebner, Church 82.

<sup>9</sup>See Klassen, Economics 90; AIO 141.

<sup>10</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 179.

<sup>11</sup>Klassen, Covenant 75.



explained the meaning of a text and those responsible for applying it, whether this was left to individuals<sup>12</sup> or to secular authorities.

This was the point at which the Swiss Brethren deserted Zwingli. On the interpretation of Scripture regarding the mass and other subjects, Zwingli and the Brethren basically agreed. But they profoundly disagreed about how to apply it. Zwingli chose to leave the application to the Zürich Council, but the Brethren regarded this as an unwarranted compromise that undermined the whole hermeneutical process by stopping short of the goal of obedient action. Zwingli was not unconcerned about implementing Scripture, but he was prepared to accept a distinction between explaining its meaning and working out its implications. For the Brethren this distinction was unacceptable. Interpretation and application were two aspects of a single process.

Marpeck, too, rejected the division between interpretation and application. Interpreters should not explain the meaning of Scripture and then abdicate responsibility for applying it. Not only was this deference to secular authorities unbiblical and detrimental to true reformation and renewal of the churches. It also drove an unacceptable wedge between interpretation and application. Marpeck wrote: "At present, the human,

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<sup>12</sup>It might be argued that the interpreter, having explained the basic meaning of a text, should allow the Spirit to guide individuals as to its application, and that to abrogate this responsibility was wrong. But the Anabaptists regarded this division between interpretation and application, interpreters and appliers, as fundamentally flawed. All believers should be involved in a corporate process of interpreting and applying Scripture, a process that neither abrogated responsibility nor quenched the Spirit, but combined individual and corporate responses to Scripture.



earthly power replaces that of the Word which no longer stands, exercises power, or rules in truth...Even though the literal Word...is preached and learned in almost all the world, the vain children of the flesh are drawn under human power and discipline"<sup>13</sup>.

The same concern appeared in Sattler's tract, "How the Scripture is to be Discerningly Divided and Explained"<sup>14</sup>. The first of three explicit principles of interpretation in this tract was summarised by Kenneth Davis as "simple obedience to Scripture's clear commands"<sup>15</sup>. The tract proceeded to explore other important elements in the accurate interpretation of Scripture, but the priority given to obedience was typical of Anabaptists and clearly indicated their emphasis on application.

William Keeney compared the Reformers' theological and reflective approach to interpretation with the more pragmatic approach of Menno and Dirk Phillips<sup>16</sup>. Their hermeneutics was inter-related with their experience and involvement in local congregations, both aspects significantly affecting the other. Tentative understandings of Scripture were tested and refined as they worked through their practical implications in the congregations, and the needs and concerns of their congregations posed new questions and perspectives with which to approach Scripture. It is, of course, arguable that the Reformers operated similarly, but the Anabaptists were not convinced that experience and practical application significantly informed their hermeneutics.

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<sup>13</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 299.

<sup>14</sup>Yoder, Legacy 153.

<sup>15</sup>Davis: "Anabaptism and Ascetic Holiness", in Stayer & Packull, Anabaptists 59.

<sup>16</sup>Keeney, Dutch 32.

Ordinary Anabaptists, also, emphasised application rather than interpretation. John Claess urged his children: "Believe not what men say, but obey the commands of the New Testament, and ask God to teach you his will. Whatever is not contained therein, believe not; but obey everything that is embraced in it"<sup>17</sup>. His concern was that his children should obey Scripture (typically the focus is on the New Testament) rather than relying on the interpretations of others which, by implication, would hinder such obedience.

### C. Obedience as a Hermeneutical Prerequisite

Anabaptists saw obedience not only as the goal of hermeneutics, but as a crucial prerequisite of hermeneutics. Their epistemology was expressed powerfully by Denck: "No one can know Christ unless he follows after him in life"<sup>18</sup>. The basis of a true knowledge of Christ - and of understanding Scripture - was a life of discipleship<sup>19</sup>. The second part of Denck's statement - "and no one can follow him unless he first know him"<sup>20</sup> -

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<sup>17</sup>MM 469.

<sup>18</sup>AIO 87. Ben Ollenburger wrote: "Denck's emphasis on the Spirit in interpretation is not what characterised him as an Anabaptist. What did was his conviction that the absolute prerequisite to reading the Bible with understanding is obedience": EBI 54. This comment provides further justification for the rehabilitation of Denck within Anabaptism suggested above.

<sup>19</sup>John Yoder (EBI 27) commented on Denck's statement that "the important thing about the correlating of commitment and knowledge is...not the emphasis that it places upon commitment and obedience, but rather the limitations it places upon knowledge." The Anabaptists were not urging the Reformers to add an emphasis on obedience to their emphasis on doctrine. They were challenging the basis on which the Reformers claimed they knew what comprised sound doctrine.

<sup>20</sup>AIO 87.



underlined the other prerequisite for hermeneutics according to the Anabaptists, namely a living experience of Christ and His Spirit. These two elements - ethical behaviour and spiritual life - were not discounted by the Reformers<sup>21</sup>, but the Anabaptists felt that their emphasis was elsewhere, on conformity to doctrinal criteria and official accreditation for teachers.

Thus, ethical qualifications took precedence over intellectual qualifications or official appointments. Living uprightly in obedience to Christ and in submission to the Scriptures one hoped to interpret was much more important than higher education, skill in languages or doctrinal correctness. Hans Keeskooper wrote from prison in 1550: "Search the Scriptures with an upright heart towards God, and the Lord will give you understanding"<sup>22</sup>. Ability to interpret was a spiritual gift consequent upon upright behaviour and a right attitude towards God. Similarly, Hut argued that discovering the truth was not achieved by studying at the universities of Wittenberg or Paris, but as part of the process of following and obeying Christ<sup>23</sup>. Hoffman in his early ministry taught that the "key of David" by which Scripture was unlocked was available only to those living in the "pure fear of God"<sup>24</sup>. Obedience, not education, was the key to a correct understanding of Scripture. Rothmann agreed that the key was given to those "who fear God with all their heart, who do his will and are always

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<sup>21</sup>Bucer and the Strasbourg Reformers emphasised discipleship more than other Reformers (see EBI 27) - another indication that Bucer was closer in spirit to the Anabaptists than most of the Reformers.

<sup>22</sup>MM 494.

<sup>23</sup>See Klaassen, in EBI 6.

<sup>24</sup>Deppermann, Hoffman 243.



so inclined"<sup>25</sup>.

Moral qualities were predominant among those sought for, not only in Anabaptist congregations as they functioned hermeneutically, but also in Anabaptist leaders and teachers, with any academic or doctrinal training regarded as a bonus - provided this training did not adversely affect their reliance on the Spirit and openness to others' contributions.

Menno accepted the need for teachers in the congregations, but argued that such teachers should be judged by their obedience to Scripture and only those whose lives showed they were regenerate and worthy to teach should be trusted as interpreters - and even then they should not be regarded as infallible or outside the authority of the congregation<sup>26</sup>. He wrote: "The pure Word of God and the teaching of the Holy Spirit cannot be pointed out and taught by servants who are themselves unclean and carnal"<sup>27</sup>. Here the link between the Spirit's work and the prerequisite of obedience is clear. Because the Anabaptists saw interpretation as essentially the Spirit's work, and because their emphasis on the Spirit's activity was ethical rather than phenomenal, effective interpretation could only be achieved by upright people, for to no others would the Spirit bequeath the necessary insights<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Waite, Joris 91.

<sup>26</sup>See further above at pp239ff for a discussion of the role of leaders/teachers in Anabaptist congregations. Everything in this section about the qualities required of teachers must be read in the light of this role.

<sup>27</sup>Menno, Works 445.

<sup>28</sup>Menno accepted that translation (which inevitably involves a measure of interpretation) could be achieved by someone "with a carnal heart without regeneration" (Works 653), but he did not regard such a person as qualified to instruct a congregation.

Kenneth Davis wrote, "The Anabaptists maintained that the only ones who have the Holy Spirit within, and thus are able to interpret correctly, are the pious, and the pious are equated exclusively with those who exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, who lead holy lives"<sup>29</sup>. Dirk Phillips, considered the qualifications for teachers. He wrote first about effectiveness in preaching and then added: "The other kind of fruit which a true teacher brings forth is a blameless life, walking in accordance with the gospel"<sup>30</sup>. The failure of state church leaders to live such upright lives disqualified them as interpreters, according to the Anabaptists.

An exchange between the Anabaptist, Claes de Praet, and his inquisitor, the Dean of Ronse, reflects the dispute between those who relied on official accreditation and those who looked for evidence of holy living in those who claimed to be competent to teach. The conversation proceeded as follows<sup>31</sup>:

Dean: "When you read the Scriptures, you were instructed by some poor, simple tradesman, who taught you the same according to his reason; therefore you are now deceived. You should have let those teach you, who have received the true doctrine, the ministers of the holy church, that is, the pastor."

Claes: "Are they the ones that have received the true doctrine?"

Dean: "Yes."

Claes: "Why, then, do they live the life of devils, as may be seen?"

Dean: "What does that concern you? It is written, Matthew 23: Do after their commandments, but not after their works."

Claes: "Are you, then, the scribes and Pharisees, of whom Matthew has written?"

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<sup>29</sup>Davis: "Anabaptism and Ascetic Holiness", in Stayer & Packull, Anabaptists 59.

<sup>30</sup>Phillips, Enchiridion 187.

<sup>31</sup>MM 556.



Dean: "Yes."

Claes: "Then all the woes come upon you, that follow further on,  
in said chapter."

Dean: "No, they do not."

This conversation illustrates the frustration many inquisitors experienced as they interrogated Anabaptists and found their biblical arguments turned against them. It also indicates the divergent emphases between the representative of the state church, whose trust was in the teacher's office, whatever the deficiencies of his moral life, and the Anabaptist, whose interest was in the interpreter's quality of life rather than any official position<sup>32</sup>.

One aspect of this moral qualification of teachers, which almost by definition excluded state church preachers, was that those who would interpret Scripture must be free from the influence of secular power and vested interests. Those who were conscious of the need not to offend the secular authorities or disturb the status quo would not be free to interpret faithfully. Their ability to respond to the sharp challenges of Scripture would be severely restricted. As Marpeck wrote, "The dull teachers have lost the sharpness of the Word, and the sword of the Spirit has been stolen from them and given over to human power"<sup>33</sup>.

The issue of finance was sometimes seen as determinative. Three Anabaptist leaders, Hans Kunzi, Steffa of Waldshut and Konrad Winckler, were reported

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<sup>32</sup>A J Klassen wrote that, in sharp contrast to the Reformers' reliance on "the infallibility of the inspired text as interpreted by the qualified theologian", the Anabaptists "insisted on the obedience of the listening disciple in the hermeneutic community": Klassen, A J: Consultation on Anabaptist Mennonite Theology (Fresno, CA: Council of Mennonite Seminaries, 1970) 108; see also Harder, Hermeneutic 26.

<sup>33</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 299.



as teaching that "our preachers mislead the common people and are sinners, and can bring forth no good fruit with their teaching, and are not able to preach the truth because they have benefices"<sup>34</sup>. Zwingli felt it necessary to defend the benefice system from Anabaptist criticisms<sup>35</sup>.

The enemy of the truth, from the Anabaptists' perspective, was not ignorance but falsehood. They were very conscious of the battle between light and darkness and suspicious of anything that might blur this distinction or cause believers to stumble. Education, theology, traditions and secular influence all came under suspicion. With the Reformers, it seems that ignorance was regarded as a greater danger, but Anabaptists were more concerned about that which seemed to be "knowledge" but was actually falsehood masquerading as truth. The Anabaptist emphasis on obedience was an attempt to protect their interpretation from the falsehood they believed would creep in if ethical criteria were not imposed. Only those actively committed to true discipleship could be trusted to interpret Scripture. They might be less equipped academically, but their ignorance was less perilous than the falsehood that might be taught by a scholar who was not truly following Christ<sup>36</sup>.

If commitment to a lifestyle of discipleship and obedience was a general prerequisite for hermeneutics in Anabaptist thought, readiness to obey the specific texts being studied was regarded as vital for effective interpretation. Without being open to correction and willing to obey what one

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<sup>34</sup>Quoted by Snyder, C Arnold: "Konrad Winckler: An Early Swiss Anabaptist Missionary, Pastor and Martyr" MQR LXIV 358.

<sup>35</sup>Pipkin, Zwingli 163.

<sup>36</sup>EBI 27.

learned from Scripture, one could expect no help from the Spirit and, consequently, no real understanding of Scripture. An early Anabaptist tract asked: "Why should God make known his will if he would not will that a person do it?"<sup>37</sup> Education might enable understanding to take place at a certain level, but the Spirit, the true interpreter, would enlighten only those whose hearts were responsive and prepared to act on what Scripture taught: "All the sophistication of interpretive methodology will be of no avail if the reader and interpreter of Scripture is not ready to obey Christ's words in his life"<sup>38</sup>. Clearly, the Anabaptists believed, the extent to which an interpreter was under the authority of ecclesiastical or secular authorities would affect his freedom to respond in simple obedience to Scripture.

The Anabaptists expressed this readiness to obey Scripture in various ways and linked it with other qualities necessary for effective interpretation. Marpeck called for interpreters to "work with earnest diligence through the Scriptures and apostolic teaching" and promised success to those who "seek to do the truth with earnest desire"<sup>39</sup>. Reliance on the Spirit and emphasis on the clarity of Scripture did not obviate the need for hard work, concentration and persistence. The level of desire to know and obey the truth affected the degree of revelation one received, according to Marpeck<sup>40</sup>.

The issue of faith was also important. The weighing of possible meanings

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<sup>37</sup>EBI 41.

<sup>38</sup>EBI 6. See also Klassen, Consultation 108.

<sup>39</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 179.

<sup>40</sup>A rather subjective criterion and impossible to measure.



of Scripture was not something to be left to the intellect but an area where faith played a vital role. Marpeck again made this clear. "We will study the Scriptures and commend our results to the judgment of every well-meaning person. According to the capacity of his faith, let each man see whether or not it is so"<sup>41</sup>. Marpeck restricted interpretation to "well-meaning" persons, presumably those genuinely open to the biblical message and ready to apply it to their lives; and he invited such people to exercise faith in order to test his own teaching. Lydia Harder wrote that "by stating emphatically that the faith community is the hermeneutic community, Anabaptists...have clearly emphasized the role of faith in the interpretive process"<sup>42</sup>.

Hubmaier, too, insisted that interpreters should approach Scripture with a right attitude. He was concerned lest quarrelling about interpretations deflected people from obedience to Christ. "Searching the Scriptures does not take place with unspiritual chatter about innovations, nor with wordy warfare fighting until one is hoarse", he declared in his challenge to John Eck<sup>43</sup>. In other words, the ethical stance ("unspiritual", "worldly") of the interpreter affected his ability to interpret.

Anabaptists did not teach that interpreters had to be perfect before they could understand Scripture - although opponents accused them of teaching perfectionism. They distinguished between occasional sins, which did not disqualify interpreters, and a sinful lifestyle, which did. Menno, especially, made this distinction, teaching that blindness resulted from sinful living since the interpreter wanted to justify his sinfulness, not

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<sup>41</sup>Klassen & Klaassen, Marpeck 204.

<sup>42</sup>Harder, Hermeneutic 23.

<sup>43</sup>Pipkin & Yoder, Hubmaier 53.



to understand God's ways and obey his will<sup>44</sup>. Similarly, Denck wrote:

"Scripture cannot possibly change an evil heart even though it may make it more learned"<sup>45</sup>. It was the inclination of the heart and the motive with which one came to Scripture that determined what one found there and its effect on the interpreter. Anabaptists did not regard gaining biblical knowledge which did not result in changed living as genuine hermeneutics. Readiness to change rather than desire for information was a key to biblical interpretation.

Obedience to one's present understanding of Scripture, and openness to obey new understandings (understandings appropriated by faith, eager desire and diligent study) were regarded by Anabaptists as prerequisites for effective hermeneutics. They were confident that such obedience would find a response in the heart of God, from whom all true interpretation came. Rothmann wrote: "If we, with constant diligence, earnestly do what we understand we will daily be taught further by God"<sup>46</sup>. This conviction resulted in what Cornelius Dyck has called "a reciprocal experience of understanding and obedience, obedience and understanding"<sup>47</sup>.

#### D. Obedience as the Test of Hermeneutics

Obedience played a third crucial role in Anabaptist hermeneutics. It was not just that only those with an obedient attitude could expect to receive understanding; nor simply that application was an integral part of the interpretive process; but that all suggested interpretations were subject

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<sup>44</sup>EBI 65.

<sup>45</sup>Furcha & Battles, Denck 124.

<sup>46</sup>EBI 30.

<sup>47</sup>EBI 37.

to an ethical test before being accepted as legitimate<sup>48</sup>. The Anabaptists insisted that one of the purposes of Scripture was to teach people how to live lives that pleased God. Therefore, one mark of true interpretation was that it resulted in the kind of behaviour that Christ called for and modelled.

Rothmann taught that an interpretation was reliable if it led to behaviour that "conforms to Christ". If such behaviour was not there, Scripture had not truly been understood<sup>49</sup>. Sadly, the application of this principle did not prevent Rothmann from being involved in the Münster incident and justifying many things which were difficult to square with Christ's example and teaching. This failure indicates the danger of subjectivity that is inherent in applying an ethical test to interpretations, but many other Anabaptists, while rejecting the Münsterite practices, retained Rothmann's emphasis on the evaluation of interpretations on the basis of ethical results.

Menno and Dirk Phillips, for example, placed great weight on the ethical consequences of interpretations of Scripture and regarded as wanting any that appeared to lead to unacceptable results. It seems, though, that they were more aware than Rothmann of the need to balance this with other hermeneutical guidelines so that it did not become a purely subjective and, therefore, vulnerable approach<sup>50</sup>. It was not that any result regarded as beneficial guaranteed that a correct interpretation had been reached, but rather that any interpretation leading to behaviour that seemed, on

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<sup>48</sup>Ens, Adolf: "Theology of the Hermeneutical Community in Anabaptist-Mennonite Thought", in Huebner, Church 85.

<sup>49</sup>AIO 141.

<sup>50</sup>Keeney, Dutch 32.



biblical grounds rather than for subjective reasons, to be deficient ethically was automatically suspect. Obedience as a test of hermeneutics functioned negatively, to weed out erroneous understandings rather than to affirm correct ones.

Examining how this principle - that interpreters should suspect any result which conflicted with biblically grounded ethical norms - was applied, it is clear that it was closely connected with the Anabaptists' Christocentrism. All interpretations were judged by how they related to the life and teachings of Christ<sup>51</sup>. It was not conformity to certain abstract ethical norms, but conformity to Christ, that acted as the plumbline which Anabaptists held up against proffered interpretations. Although this did not in itself remove the danger of subjectivity (for the meaning of "conformity to Christ" needed to be determined), the use of the life and teachings of Christ as the plumbline did ensure that the ethical test remained firmly within the Anabaptist commitment to the sole authority of Scripture. No external ethical norms were allowed to challenge biblical interpretation; but the internal norm of the life and teaching of Christ took precedence over all interpretations and judged their adequacy<sup>52</sup>.

The Reformers did not ignore the ethical implications of their interpretations, although it seems that theological rather than ethical conformity was uppermost in their thinking. No interpretations could be endorsed which appeared to undermine or to be inconsistent with their central

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<sup>51</sup>"For them the true test of a theological statement was its compatibility with the life and doctrine of Jesus Christ and the apostles". See Miller, Marlin: "Theology" ME Vol V 882.

<sup>52</sup>Klaassen, Neither 43.



theological commitments. But there was also a concern to evaluate interpretations by their ethical results - although the conclusions they reached were often very different from the Anabaptists. Earlier sections<sup>53</sup> examined the Reformers' tendency to adopt interpretations of Scripture that conserved the social order rather than challenging it. Using concepts like "love" and "faith", they rejected certain Anabaptist interpretations on the grounds that these would lead to disturbances and other harmful consequences. Bullinger, for example, argued that certain texts might need to be given "another meaning than the one yielded by the words themselves" in order to maintain peace and order<sup>54</sup>.

The debate between Reformers and Anabaptists, then, was not simply over whether theological or ethical consequences should function as a filter for possible understandings of Scripture. Both groups were interested in the ethical consequences, but they disagreed as to the norms that should be applied in evaluating these. For the Reformers, social stability was very important. For Anabaptists, obedience to Christ's specific teachings and imitation of his lifestyle outweighed this concern, as they committed themselves to establishing a new social order (in their churches, at least, if not in the whole of society) rather than preserving the existing one. They can be criticised for failing to apply Scripture to the wider

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<sup>53</sup>See above at pp51, 102.

<sup>54</sup>RR 593. Similar statements can be found in Oecolampadius and Zwingli.

social and political issues beyond their own communities<sup>55</sup>, but their freedom from concern about maintaining social and ecclesiastical givens enabled them to consider and embrace interpretations which others ruled out as dangerous and destabilising.

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<sup>55</sup>It is arguable that the Reformers similarly failed to apply Scripture faithfully to society. Unlike the Anabaptists, they attempted to do this, but the results suggest that they tailored Scripture to fit in with existing social and political norms, rather than critiquing these on the basis of Scripture.

## E. Systematic Designations

Several designations have been suggested by scholars in attempting to encapsulate the distinctive Anabaptist approach to biblical interpretation. Some refer also to other aspects of Anabaptist hermeneutics than the ethical dimension, but they all relate primarily to the issue of obedience or the application of Scripture.

Such designations inevitably risk being simplistic or misleading, given both the diversity among Anabaptists and their lack of inclination and opportunity to produce systematic treatises on hermeneutics. The suggested designations should not be considered descriptions that would necessarily have been regarded by the Anabaptists as adequately expressing their concerns. But they do highlight certain salient features of the way they approached Scripture, and especially the ethical dimension of this.

### (1) Hermeneutics of Grace

Alvin Beachey used this term in his study of the concept of grace in the Radical Reformation. He compared Luther's "sola scriptura" with Menno's "according to the Scriptures" and concluded that there was no appreciable difference between them on the issue of biblical authority. But, he continued, "It is not enough to enunciate the principle, sola scriptura, once the sole right of the correct interpretation of Scripture by an authoritarian and institutionalized church has been denied. The moment this is done the individual interpreter is driven to search for some hermeneutical method of his own...It was in the course of their quest for such a method that the Radical Reformers developed what can in some



respects best be described as the hermeneutics of grace"<sup>1</sup>.

To assess this comment, it is necessary to understand what Beachey believed the radical reformers meant by grace. Benjamin Farley described Calvin's approach to Scripture as characterised by an emphasis on "grace alone"<sup>2</sup>, but this was not the concept Beachey had in mind. He acknowledged that grace among Anabaptists was a "complex and many-sided concept"<sup>3</sup>, suggesting that, as well as covering the Reformers' soteriological emphasis, it included an anthropological aspect that embraced a different view of original sin, and an eschatological aspect that anticipated the divinisation of humanity. Anabaptists regarded grace not just as the free gift of salvation but as empowering to live a transformed life.

In relation to hermeneutics, this appears to mean<sup>4</sup> three things. First, everyone possesses a natural grace that can enable them to understand Scripture provided their motives are right. Although sin has debilitated human minds, God's grace is sufficient to overcome this. Hans Denck, in particular, stressed that the divine spark within humanity was a key to understanding Scripture. Second, since grace relates to new life in Christ, Scripture must be interpreted in a way that emphasises the ethical implications of following Christ. For Calvin, grace operated as a hermeneutical key to emphasise God's sovereignty, but for many Anabaptists

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<sup>1</sup>Beachey, Grace 129. But Beachey's study omitted the Swiss Brethren and Hutterites, and included non-Anabaptists (Schwenckfeld). He concentrated on the movement's spiritualist wing rather than its literalist wing.

<sup>2</sup>Farley, Calvin 26.

<sup>3</sup>Beachey, Grace 173.

<sup>4</sup>Though Beachey did not spell this out, nor did he define the "hermeneutics of grace".

it operated as a key to emphasise the response of discipleship. Third, Scripture is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Faith should be in Christ, to whom Scripture points, rather than in Scripture. This implies a Christocentric approach and a preference for the New Testament (the era of grace) over the Old (the era of law or promise)<sup>5</sup>.

It is unnecessary here to investigate all these implications of the "hermeneutics of grace", since the first and third have been explored in earlier sections<sup>6</sup>. The second implication relates more directly to the issue of obedience to Scripture. The use of the term "grace" provides a helpful balance to the otherwise works-orientated feel of this aspect of Anabaptist hermeneutics. It emphasises that the determination to apply Scripture, rather than just trying to understand it, was motivated less by legalistic pressure than by a cheerful determination to experience the reality of "new life in Christ" with all its challenging possibilities. As such, Beachey's phrase is a useful insight, and a corrective to studies that emphasise the legalistic tendencies in Anabaptism.

However, the rather vague connection in Beachey's study between grace and hermeneutics suggests that defining Anabaptist hermeneutics in this way is inadequate. The term "hermeneutics of grace" fitted neatly into the study, but it seems that neatness of terminology was achieved at the expense of comprehensiveness and accuracy. The restriction of the study to the more spiritualistic Anabaptists also questions the adequacy of his terminology if it is applied (as Beachey did not) to Anabaptism as a whole. The reference to grace is important but "hermeneutics of grace" is not a

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<sup>5</sup>Beachey, Grace 177.

<sup>6</sup>See especially pp104ff, 219ff.



synonym for "hermeneutics of obedience", let alone an adequate definition of Anabaptist hermeneutics as a whole.

## (2) Ascetic Hermeneutics

The possible influence of monasticism on early Anabaptism was noted in the discussion of the movement's origins and sources of inspiration<sup>7</sup>. Attention has usually focused on Sattler, formerly a prior in a monastery, whose writings seem to display traces of monastic influence. Kenneth Davis, who has explored this feature of Anabaptism<sup>8</sup>, suggested the term "ascetic hermeneutics" to indicate the influence of ethical concerns on the Anabaptists' approach to biblical interpretation. He noted<sup>9</sup> several "ascetically oriented facets in the development of the distinctively Anabaptist hermeneutic".

He referred first to "a limited kind of anti-intellectualism", by which he meant that Anabaptists were primarily concerned with "simplicity of obedience without any admixture or pollution by human inventions or philosophy." This suspicion of learning as a distraction from obedience has been noted frequently above. Davis interpreted this as an ascetic approach in that personal comfort and social implications were regarded as less important than costly obedience. It is arguable that the Anabaptists, in their determination to take seriously the "hard sayings" of Scripture, tended to equate correct interpretations with those that demanded the greatest self-denial and suffering.

Second, he contrasted Luther's dualism of "law" and "grace" with the

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<sup>7</sup>See above at p10.

<sup>8</sup>Davis, Anabaptism passim.

<sup>9</sup>In Stayer & Packull, Anabaptists 59.



Anabaptist dualism of "mortification" and "spiritual regeneration", which he concluded "takes on hermeneutical significance." He examined an early tract, thought to be by Sattler, entitled "How the Scripture is to be Discerningly Divided and Explained", and noted there "a long table of typically ascetic opposites, a dualistic key to clarify the correct thrust of scriptural teaching as it relates to the penitent life, death versus life, evil-good, flesh-spirit, external-internal, and so on".

Davis' conclusion was that "the Anabaptist movement from the beginning, with only minor variations, had a common and unique hermeneutic which arose from their defense of an essentially ascetic and ethical conception of Christianity." He agreed with Myron Augsburger that Sattler had an "ascetic hermeneutic" but argued that all the major branches of Anabaptism "possessed an ascetic hermeneutic, which was not only Christological but ethical and practical, over against a soteriological hermeneutic centred on justification by faith in Luther." "Holiness", he wrote elsewhere<sup>10</sup>, "is not only emphasized, it governs every other aspect of Anabaptism's theology...even hermeneutics."

It is unclear how much this term "ascetic hermeneutic" adds to an examination of the ethical focus of Anabaptist hermeneutics. As with Beachey, the adoption of this term appears too neat, enabling Davis to describe Anabaptist hermeneutics in a way that was congruent with his delineation of the whole movement. It provides a slightly different perspective on the Anabaptists' view of scholarship, and it indicates the

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<sup>10</sup>In Lienhard, Origins 32.

importance of dualism in their approach<sup>11</sup>. More importantly, perhaps, it introduces the aspect of suffering - although the term "ascetic" suggests self-imposed suffering rather than the persecution which characterised the Anabaptists' experience. Anabaptists were not "ascetic" in the traditional monastic sense<sup>12</sup>, but they expected obedience to result in suffering, and they insisted that their interpretation of Scripture should not be influenced by attempts to avoid such consequences.

This affected their hermeneutics in other ways. First, in their definition of who was qualified to interpret Scripture, the emphasis was not just on a moral life but on readiness to suffer. Obedience was understood as costly commitment. Menno asked: "Tell me, is not the Word of Christ called the word of the cross ?" and declared that "the command to the believing is only this, to deny themselves and take up the cross and follow him"<sup>13</sup>. Dirk Phillips, considering the qualifications of interpreters, concluded that "the true teachers must be tried by the cross, because in their words and actions they desire to be different from the world"<sup>14</sup>. Of all the Anabaptist leaders, Hans Hut made the closest connection between suffering and hermeneutics. Reflecting his background in German mysticism and drawing on Denck's influence, Hut stressed that ethical behaviour was obedience to Christ, and that obedience to Christ required participation in the suffering of Christ's body. Only through *Gelassenheit* (a difficult term to translate, but approximating to surrender or resignation) could

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<sup>11</sup>On which see further below at p286.

<sup>12</sup>Although Holland suggested that the Hutterite emphasis on community of goods reflected an ascetic approach: see Holland, Hermeneutics 131.

<sup>13</sup>Menno, Works 1004.

<sup>14</sup>Phillips, Enchiridion 192.



one experience the cross of Christ; and only through this could one receive understanding of Scripture<sup>15</sup>.

Second, as Alan Kreider wrote<sup>16</sup> about uneducated Anabaptists, "their poverty and suffering enabled them to see a whole dimension of biblical truth - the vocation of all believers to suffering and 'cross-bearing' - which more learned theologians overlooked or soon forgot." Anabaptists considered themselves the true heirs of the persecuted early churches and believed that this gave them hermeneutical insights which were hidden from state theologians who were comfortable, had vested interests, and were persecutors rather than being persecuted<sup>17</sup>. Menno, for example, identified suffering as one of the marks of a true church<sup>18</sup>. This suffering brought the believer into deep fellowship with Christ and this fellowship was the key to understanding Scripture. Once again the close connection between obedience and the experience of the Spirit is evident, with suffering as the catalyst.

### (3) Kingdom Hermeneutics

The importance of the concept of the kingdom of God in Anabaptism is difficult to assess. Robert Friedmann suggested that their understanding of the "two kingdoms" (which was quite different from Luther's) was the

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<sup>15</sup>On Hut, see EBI 41, 55; Deppermann, Hoffman 201. *Gelassenheit* was important in David Joris' hermeneutics also: see Waite, Joris 93.

<sup>16</sup>Kreider, "Servant" 12.

<sup>17</sup>See Jeschke, Marlin: "How Mennonites Have Done and Should Do Theology", in Swartley, Explorations 10.

<sup>18</sup>EBI 41. The same conviction underlies Martyrs' Mirror.



key to their theology<sup>19</sup>. But, as Friedmann himself admitted<sup>20</sup>, the term was not greatly used by Anabaptist writers. The term "rule of Christ" was more popular and seems to have meant the same thing, and it is likely that the conviction that the gathered church was the place where God's kingdom was at work resulted in an emphasis on the church rather than careful distinctions between church and kingdom<sup>21</sup>. Nevertheless, the Anabaptists' use of the Synoptic Gospels, where the kingdom of God is frequently mentioned, supports Friedmann's claim that in their perception, if not always in their terminology, the Anabaptists operated within a "kingdom" framework<sup>22</sup>.

Friedmann argued that this kingdom perspective functioned for Anabaptists as the key to biblical interpretation. Although he did not use the term "kingdom hermeneutics", he wrote<sup>23</sup>: "The Scriptures, mainly the New Testament, were for them the great text book of the kingdom of God, understood in the twofold meaning of the kingdom - the one that has already come and is 'among us', and the one which is still to come." The Anabaptist concentration on the New Testament, and on Jesus in particular,

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<sup>19</sup>Friedmann, Theology 41.

<sup>20</sup>Friedmann, Theology 43.

<sup>21</sup>Arnold Snyder characterised their approach as follows: "The fulness of the kingdom must await Christ's return. However, the true disciples have a foretaste of the kingdom in their separated communities, for that is where love and justice are practised": Snyder: "The Relevance of Anabaptist Nonviolence for Nicaragua Today", in Schipani, Freedom 119.

<sup>22</sup>Friedmann wrote: The real representatives of the Synoptic kingdom theology have always been the old evangelical brotherhoods, but none were more outspokenly kingdom-oriented ...than the Anabaptists: Friedmann: "The Doctrine of the Two Worlds", in Stayer & Packull, Anabaptists 24.

<sup>23</sup>Friedmann, "Essence" 24.

fits well into this "kingdom hermeneutic", in that it was Jesus who spoke most about the kingdom and taught that with his coming God's kingdom was present in a new way. Their determination to interpret Scripture Christocentrically can be understood either as the outworking of a commitment to a kingdom hermeneutic, or as the basis for such a kingdom hermeneutic. Friedmann wrote elsewhere<sup>24</sup> about "the Anabaptist shift in the point of view from which the Holy Scripture itself was read, the shift of focus from the doctrine of justification, as it is to be found in the epistles of the Apostle Paul, over to the doctrine of the kingdom of God which the Gospel itself proclaimed." A kingdom hermeneutic focused attention on the Gospels and on the teaching of Christ, just as Christocentrism inevitably led to attention being given to the kingdom theme.

There was a definite ethical focus, too, in the Anabaptist use of kingdom concepts. Friedmann, like Davis, believed that they operated with a different kind of dualism from the Reformers. He argued that they replaced Luther's law/grace dualism with a Christ/world dualism, and that this constituted their "kingdom theology"<sup>25</sup>. This perspective enabled them to distinguish between what was acceptable "within the perfection of Christ" and what was appropriate outside this. Menno, for example, wrote: "The Scriptures teach that there are two opposing princes and two opposing kingdoms"<sup>26</sup>. On the basis of this dualistic approach, he asked: "Where do the holy Scriptures teach that in Christ's kingdom and church we shall proceed with the magistrate, with the sword, and with physical force and

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<sup>24</sup>Friedmann, Robert: Mennonite Piety through the Centuries (Goshen: Mennonite Historical Society, 1949) 85-6.

<sup>25</sup>Friedmann, Theology 41. See also Holland, Hermeneutics 131.

<sup>26</sup>Menno, Works 554.



tyranny over a man's conscience and faith, things subject to the judgment of God alone ?"<sup>27</sup> This had considerable hermeneutical significance, as the conclusions reached on this basis at Schleithem demonstrate<sup>28</sup>.

Lawrence Burkholder, also, defined the Anabaptist concept of the kingdom in ethical terms. He wrote: "The question which the Anabaptists asked was: what does it mean to follow Christ ? Or, what does it mean to submit life in its totality to the claims of the kingdom of God ?"<sup>29</sup>. This can be seen in Dirk Phillips' writings. His teaching on the importance of having biblical interpreters who were living upright lives was set in the context of the kingdom of God<sup>30</sup>.

The Christological and eschatological significance of the kingdom theme had an important effect on the ethical focus of Anabaptist hermeneutics. Without this overarching vision, this ethical focus could easily have degenerated into mere legalism. But equating obedience with following Christ rather than obeying rules, and identifying the ultimate goal of discipleship, offered some protection from this. James Reimer suggested that if an attempt were made to write an Anabaptist-Mennonite systematic theology, it could be written from "a prophetic-eschatological perspective in which the anticipated and promised kingdom of God is the ordering principle; individual and social ethics based on a christology of

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<sup>27</sup>Menno, Works 537.

<sup>28</sup>Yoder, Schleithem; see also Snyder's discussion of the "kingdom" orientation of Schleithem, in Schipani, Freedom 119.

<sup>29</sup>Burkholder, J Lawrence: "The Anabaptist Vision of Discipleship", in Hershberger, Recovery 136.

<sup>30</sup>Phillips, Enchiridion 187.



nonviolent self-giving love would be the kind of hermeneutical key that justification by grace through faith is for the Lutherans"<sup>31</sup>.

#### (4) Activist Hermeneutics

John Oyer used this term in his comparison of the Lutheran Reformers and the Anabaptists. He wrote: "Anabaptists in the Reformation era were essentially doers, persons who tried to put into practice the teachings of Scripture...the Anabaptist hermeneutic was activist in nature, captivated by the term mission"<sup>32</sup>.

The reference to Anabaptists as "doers" does not appear to add to the conclusion of the earlier part of this section, that the Anabaptists emphasised application rather than mere interpretation. The interesting aspect of Oyer's comment is the connection between activism and mission. There was in early Anabaptism a tremendous sense of responsibility to preach the gospel and to persuade men and women to follow Christ. This contrasted sharply with the more pastoral approach adopted by the Reformers and consistent with their territorial church polity. The Anabaptists, with their strong dualism between the kingdom of God and the world, were prepared to travel huge distances and to risk capture and punishment in order to spread their beliefs and summon people into the kingdom of God.

This gave urgency to all their activities, hermeneutics included. Their

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<sup>31</sup>Reimer: "Mennonite Systematic Theology and the Problem of Comprehensiveness", in Swartley, Explorations 67.

<sup>32</sup>Oyer: "The Influence of Jacob Strauss on the Anabaptists. A Problem in Historical Methodology", in Lienhard, Origins 71.

emphasis on application was less a naive attempt to bypass difficult interpretive issues than a reflection of their concern to follow Christ and to call others to do so in the light of the present and coming kingdom. Debating the finer points of exegesis was not a luxury Anabaptists were prepared to indulge in. Their sense of mission, and the eschatological background against which they understood this, may not have assisted the Anabaptists greatly on specific points of interpretation, but it protected them from getting bogged down in theoretical discussions that were divorced from the practicalities of serving Christ. The frequent reference to the "great commission" (especially the Matthean form of this) in Anabaptist writings demonstrates the importance they attached to this. It is arguable that this commission functioned as a hermeneutical key in the same way as the concept of the kingdom of God<sup>33</sup>.

#### E. Evaluation

These attempts to define Anabaptist hermeneutics are inadequate but instructive. None of them quite captures the spirit of the Anabaptist approach or is broad enough to encompass the various elements that together produced this distinctive practice. Other suggestions include "discipleship hermeneutics"<sup>34</sup> or "hermeneutics of obedience"<sup>35</sup>. These are broader than the above definitions but also less specific. The more specific terms are less comprehensive, but they identify important features that might otherwise be missed. Some of them indicate also how this ethical aspect of Anabaptist hermeneutics related to other features

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<sup>33</sup>Friedmann, Piety 85.

<sup>34</sup>EBI 29-44; Harder, Hermeneutic 26.

<sup>35</sup>EBI 45.



such as Christocentrism, the simplicity of Scripture and the role of the Spirit.

Turning to an evaluation of the approach itself, rather than terms used by scholars to describe it, there are some obvious criticisms that can be levelled against it. First, there is no need to drive such a large wedge between understanding and application. Although interminable discussion on the former to the detriment of the latter may be unacceptable, a balance between the two which does not undermine either would be preferable to a competitive dichotomy. There is no necessary correlation between an emphasis on the plain sense of Scripture and obedience to Scripture. Nor need a more sophisticated approach give less attention to application. Nevertheless, the Anabaptists were concerned that in practice application was being marginalised.

Second, until a proper understanding of Scripture is attained, activism and superficial applications may be harmful rather than fruitful<sup>36</sup>. Third, a hermeneutical spiral, whereby action and reflection work together to increase both understanding and obedience, may be a better model than the virtual opposition of these elements. Fourth, Anabaptists were probably insufficiently aware of the subtlety of sin and the weakness of the human will. Their ethical expectations were inevitably selective, with the result that they judged interpreters and interpretations by selective criteria. Fifth, their identification of falsehood as the main enemy rather than ignorance failed to consider the possibility of would-be disciples honestly believing untruth or interpreting Scripture wrongly.

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<sup>36</sup>Holland, Hermeneutics 70, 146-7.



Sixth, evaluating interpretations by their ethical results presupposes prior commitments and values and thus risks subjecting Scripture to human opinions about what it should mean. The Anabaptist focus on Jesus as the norm provided some protection, in that the presuppositions were biblical and Christocentric rather than independent, but if Jesus himself is interpreted in the light of the same ethical presuppositions, a rather vicious circle results. Cornelius Dyck warned that "we need to be particularly concerned about the cause-effect relationship between the presuppositions the Anabaptists brought to the Bible and the new insights they took from it"<sup>37</sup>. Most interpreters accept that presuppositionless interpretation is impossible. Willard Swartley insisted that this applies to prior ethical commitments also. "The interpreter's judgment of what is evil affects hermeneutical perception"<sup>38</sup>.

Finally, focusing on ethics can become a hindrance to encountering the Christ to whom Scripture points. The Anabaptists' Christocentrism and their experience of the Spirit may have provided some protection against this, but the danger remains that ethical principles (even Christ-centred principles) might obscure Christ himself. Myron Augsburger's warning was salutary: "The ultimate meaning of Word is Person...One who lifts from the Scriptures moral principles for ethical living unquestionably has a superior ethic, but he may miss the person in whose fellowship alone he can find the power to live righteously"<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup>EBI 32; see also Poettcker, Henry: "Anabaptist-Mennonite Hermeneutics", in Dyck, Witness 369.

<sup>38</sup>A comment by Swartley in his Conrad Grebel Lecture 31/10/79 entitled "How shall we then read the Bible ?"

<sup>39</sup>Augsburger, Principles 29.

Nevertheless, several scholars have suggested that this emphasis on the role of obedience was a significant feature of Anabaptist hermeneutics<sup>40</sup>. The insistence that application was an integral part of interpretation, rather than a separate task; the emphasis on ethical qualification for interpreting, rather than academic or institutional; and the conviction that Christians should operate with an epistemology of obedience, present a continuing challenge to traditional concepts and practices of biblical interpretation and provide a useful historical basis from which to consider contemporary movements which emphasise reflection on action, or praxis, rather than the traditional movement from theory to practical application<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup>EBI 32, 59.

<sup>41</sup>On this, see below at pp347ff.

### Summary

Surveys of Anabaptist hermeneutics face two temptations, both of which result in artificiality. One temptation is to assume that the Anabaptists had developed an integrated hermeneutic in which the six characteristics outlined above were carefully synthesised. The opposite temptation is to treat these six characteristics in isolation. Distinguishing the six characteristics and exploring each separately has aided comprehension and critical evaluation, but it should not be inferred that the Anabaptists themselves were consciously working with these six principles, nor that they can in practice be separated, however helpful such division is for theoretical study.

The purpose of this section is to indicate areas in which the six principles that can be discerned in Anabaptist hermeneutics overlap and qualify each other. How far Anabaptists themselves acknowledged these areas is not easy to assess. Some indications were given above of specific instances of these principles qualifying each other<sup>1</sup>, but there is insufficient evidence upon which to base conclusions regarding the degree to which their approach was synthesised. A post hoc attempt to integrate their approach will inevitably be somewhat artificial, but it will provide a helpful foundation for the exploration in the final section of the contemporary significance of Anabaptist hermeneutics.

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, pp94-5, 141.



## (1) Scripture as Self-interpreting

The conviction that Scripture was clear enough for ordinary Christians to understand and apply without the assistance of education, philosophical or theological expertise, clerical guidance or ecclesiastical tradition, together with the expectation that difficult passages would be illuminated by clearer ones, was in practice qualified by other convictions.

Scripture was clear, they taught, when it was read communally and under the tuition of the Holy Spirit. Such clarity could not be expected, however, by individuals reading it alone or by those who neglected the Spirit's help. Anabaptists actively relied on the Holy Spirit as the interpreter who would lead believers into the truth and whose teaching was more helpful than education or theological expertise. And they located interpretation in a communal context, where the right of individual interpretation was safeguarded but where the results of such interpretation were open to challenge and correction. Furthermore, this communal context must consist of those who were committed to discipleship. Scripture was clear only to those who approached it with a right attitude, with a commitment to obedience, rather than curiosity or merely intellectual questions.

In addition to these locational and attitudinal qualifications, there was a substantive qualification to the conviction that Scripture was perspicuous. Anabaptists regarded Scripture as Christocentric, seeing the words and example of Jesus as the clearest and most accessible portion of Scripture. All other passages were interpreted in the light of this. They acknowledged that the Old Testament was less easy to interpret, requiring careful handling lest it detract from the centrality of Jesus and the

radical newness of the new covenant. But since Christians were no longer under the old covenant, they could concentrate on the New Testament and use it to explain the Old Testament. In practice, therefore, not all of Scripture was clear, but guided by the principle of Christocentrism, ordinary believers could use the Bible with confidence.

## (2) Christocentrism

The centrality of Jesus in Scripture, a key element in the Anabaptists' understanding of Scripture as self-interpreting, was a foundation stone of Anabaptist hermeneutics and theology. He was regarded as the one to whom all of Scripture pointed and witnessed, and his words and deeds were authoritative and normative. All of Scripture was to be understood in the light of Jesus.

The Anabaptists' conviction that this part of Scripture was the clearest of all (though also the most demanding) meant that the principles of Christocentrism and the clarity of Scripture overlapped and reinforced each other. So fundamental was this principle of Christocentrism in Anabaptist hermeneutics that it tended to qualify other elements rather than itself being qualified. However, discerning the meaning and significance of the life and teachings of Jesus was necessary if this was to act as the key to the rest of Scripture. Thus Christocentrism was qualified by the recognition that it was in the hermeneutic community that such clarity emerged and that the teachings of Jesus were appreciated and obeyed. Individual interpreters could misunderstand Scripture even if they were trying to operate Christocentrically. Furthermore, the emphasis on the Spirit as interpreter and the attempt to balance "Word" and "Spirit" meant



that the "spirit and intention" of Jesus were sometimes sought rather than a legalistic interpretation of his words. This might mean, in practice, that considerations from other parts of the Bible were allowed to instruct interpreters in their understanding of Jesus' intentions and concerns, although the Anabaptists were very wary of any dilution of his actual words or any erosion of his pivotal position.

### (3) The Two Testaments

From this Anabaptist conviction that Jesus Christ was pivotal to biblical revelation flowed the priority they accorded to the New Testament. They were convinced that the new covenant he introduced made it impossible to put the Old Testament on the same level as the New. Although they acknowledged the essential unity of Scripture, the Anabaptists' Bible was not flat, and they emphasised the discontinuity between the Testaments.

Two of their other convictions, however, qualified this focus on the New Testament and helped to prevent the jettisoning of the Old. First, their emphasis on the clarity and self-interpreting nature of Scripture saved them from emphasising the discontinuity of the Testaments even more strongly. If Scripture is self-interpreting, it must have a basic unity and coherence. Provided the two Testaments were not confused, much spiritual benefit, albeit of a devotional nature, could be gained from the Old Testament. Second, reliance on the Spirit encouraged some Anabaptists to reclaim the Old Testament using allegorical methods, although these were usually circumscribed to avoid speculation and were certainly not allowed to prejudice the priority accorded to the New Testament. Thus the New Testament focus was qualified by these ways in which the Old Testament was retained in use.



As well as being qualified in these ways, the New Testament focus was both refined and further qualified by the very Christocentrism which had led to the prioritising of the New Testament in the first place. The qualification resulted from the refusal totally to identify "New Testament" with "new covenant", so that some Old Testament teachings, if understood Christocentrically, could be received as "new covenant" in nature and could attain equal authority to New Testament teachings. However, Anabaptists were predominantly New Testament-oriented, rejecting the Reformers' attempts to "find" Christ behind numerous Old Testament texts, so this qualification was relatively minor.

More significant was the Anabaptist practice of subjecting the whole of the New Testament, as well as the Old, to the revelation of Jesus Christ contained in Scripture. The person, teaching and ministry of Jesus as recorded in Scripture (primarily in the Gospels) provided the key to interpreting all other passages in both Testaments. Although the teaching of the apostles (the remainder of the New Testament) was highly regarded and sometimes not distinguished clearly from that of Jesus, the Christocentric principle did refine still further the focus on the New Testament. It was the New Testament, Christocentrically interpreted, that took priority.

#### (4) Spirit and Word

The use of allegorisation, mentioned above, was one element in the debate about Spirit and Word that characterised the early Reformation period. On a continuum linking spiritualists at one extreme to literalists at the other, most Anabaptists (with the exception of the Zürich group) could be

located nearer the spiritualists than the Reformers. But, though they were accused of both literalism and spiritualism, Anabaptists were committed both to the normative role of Scripture and to the active involvement of the Holy Spirit in the process of interpretation.

Their emphasis on the role of the Spirit was tempered by some of their other convictions. First, their belief that Scripture was essentially plain and self-interpreting protected them from adopting speculative interpretations under the influence of so-called illuminism. Common sense and the obvious meaning of the text were not rejected in favour of more esoteric or supposedly spiritual meanings derived from their reliance on the Spirit as interpreter. They seem to have felt no tension between reliance on the Spirit and looking for the obvious meaning of the text. Second, their Christocentrism meant that any supposed guidance from the Spirit had to be squared with the teaching and example of Jesus. They acknowledged that the Holy Spirit was the Spirit of Jesus and that He would not teach them anything inconsistent with what Jesus had taught<sup>2</sup>. Third, their locating of interpretive authority in the community of believers delivered them to a large extent from individualistic interpretations that were not open to scrutiny. The Spirit was expected to bring the believers to agreement as well as operating through charismatically gifted individuals.

#### (5) Congregational Hermeneutics

This conviction that the congregation was where Scripture should be interpreted, rather than the university, the preacher's study or the mind

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<sup>2</sup>On this point see Blough, Christologie 45.



of the individual, was fundamental in Anabaptism. However, this too must be understood in the context of other important convictions.

These primarily concern the nature of the hermeneutic community, which was understood as both a charismatic community and a community of disciples. The Anabaptist emphasis on the role of the Spirit meant that only a congregation where there was freedom for the Spirit to guide individuals and unite the community around the Word was able to operate properly as a hermeneutic community. And the Anabaptist emphasis on obedience as a prerequisite for understanding Scripture meant that only a community of disciples could expect illumination. Unfaithfulness could make a congregation unable to function properly as a hermeneutic community.

It is arguable that this involved a vicious circle, in that presumably most communities would have assumed they were being faithful and would have interpreted Scripture in the light of their understanding of faithfulness. It was here that the influence of other communities could play a role. Certainly such charges were sometimes levelled by one congregation against another when there were disagreements regarding interpretations. Although this does not provide a complete safeguard against the vicious circle of subjectivity, it does offer some protection. The comparison of varying subjective approaches does result in a measure of objectivity. The hermeneutic community had a translocal dimension, as was evident from conferences such as that at Schleithem.

There were two other substantive qualifications which limited the interpretive freedom of the congregation, although the first only marginally. The belief that Scripture was usually plain and self-interpreting in



theory limited the role of the congregation, but in practice there were enough unclear passages to require the help of others and the guidance of the congregational leaders. The hermeneutic community was the setting within which clarity was discovered. Its motivation was to attain clarity in order to obey Scripture fully, so an emphasis on the clarity of Scripture would not have been perceived as a limitation of its competence but as an advantage in its task. More important was the emphasis on Jesus and the New Testament, which meant that communal understandings of Scripture were expected to be in line with this fundamental Christocentrism - although here too it was in the community that the meaning of Jesus' life and teaching was established.

#### (6) Hermeneutic of Obedience

The congregation, then, had to be not only charismatic but comprised of believers committed to following Jesus as obedient disciples. The importance attached to ethical considerations in interpreting Scripture, both in the legitimising of interpreters and the testing of their conclusions, is clear from Anabaptist writings. However, this principle overlapped with others in certain ways which in some measure qualified it.

First, the ethical presuppositions by which they tested both interpreters and their interpretations were, at least in theory<sup>3</sup>, not free-standing but derived from their Christocentrism. This was necessary if their commitment to the sola scriptura principle was not to be compromised by importing an ethical norm that somehow stood over against Scripture. Thus, the ethical

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<sup>3</sup>It is arguable, of course, that ethical convictions were not only derived from Christocentric biblical interpretation but shaped the portrait of Christ which emerged.

focus was subordinate to their Christocentrism. Second, their commitment to the clarity of Scripture meant that the obvious interpretations tended to be accepted even if their ethical implications had not been carefully assessed. This was inevitably the case in the early years of the movement when there was not enough time to consider every issue in detail. But in principle no disagreement was anticipated between the obvious meaning of a text and its ethically-tested interpretation. The Anabaptists' concern was to avoid devious interpretations that resulted in ethically questionable consequences. Testing interpretations ethically and insisting on the plain meaning of the text were attempts to avoid such consequences<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup>At this point it would not be surprising if the question of why Anabaptism led to the appalling incident at Münster were raised. How could a hermeneutics that so emphasised ethical criteria have been used to justify events there? The short answer is that it was not Anabaptist hermeneutics that was used at Münster. It is clear that at Münster biblical interpretation was tested neither ethically nor by common sense criteria. The acceptance of subjective, individualistic interpretations and the disregard of New Testament ethical norms went hand in hand. Most Anabaptists rejected the Münster debacle as totally illegitimate. The hermeneutics of the Münsterites were radically different from that described in this study. Old Testament teachings took precedence over the New Testament, and the Christocentric principle was absent. Ethical criteria were ignored in favour of "spiritual" revelations. Common sense interpretations were superseded by visions and millenarian fervour. And self-appointed leaders determined the meaning of biblical texts rather than functioning within a hermeneutic community. What is interesting is that Münsterite hermeneutics had more in common with the approach of the Reformers, who were horrified by developments there, than with the Anabaptist approach. Dirk Philips regarded the Reformers and Münsterites as equally deficient in their use of the Old Testament. See above at p160. Münster demonstrates what is possible when some of the Reformers' hermeneutical principles were used by unscrupulous leaders. It reveals little, if anything, about Anabaptist hermeneutics which was fundamentally different from that used in Münster. The Münsterites were historically related to Anabaptism, but their divergence from the mainstream was based on an alien hermeneutics.



An examination of how the Anabaptists interpreted Scripture on a specific issue will clarify how the six elements discussed in this study functioned in practice. It will also demonstrate their inter-relationship (albeit without suggesting a conscious synthesis). Various issues could be used for such a case study. The oath has been chosen partly because of its sixteenth century significance, and partly because Anabaptist writings on this issue illustrate clearly many of the principles examined in this study.

The swearing of oaths was an important component of the European sacral state. Oaths were intended to guarantee the truth of statements in situations where truth was crucial, such as the law courts. They were also used to express and reinforce commitments to the city or state, including a readiness to take up arms in its defence. Catholics and Protestants agreed that Scripture forbade the breaking of oaths, the swearing of false oaths and the frivolous use of oaths. But they accepted the use of oaths to swear loyalty and to support statements in legal matters.

The Anabaptists confronted the issue of the oath in the earliest years of the movement. It impinged on two other issues of great importance to them: warfare and their relationship with the political authorities. If they refused to swear oaths, they risked condemnation as revolutionaries and traitors. It was one of seven key topics discussed at the pivotal Schleithem conference in 1527. The way they dealt with biblical teaching on the oath and the conclusions they reached differed markedly from their contemporaries.



Anabaptist teaching on the oath was not univocal. Most adopted the Schleithem position that Christians should not swear in any circumstances. "Yes" and "No" were sufficient. This was the teaching of the Swiss Brethren, the Dutch Mennonites and the Hutterites. However, some South German Anabaptists, such as Hut and Denck, were less inclined to make an issue of the oath (although they participated at Schleithem and did not dissent from the statement on the oath in the Schleithem Confession), and the Marpeck circle attempted to find a mediating position. The views of Hubmaier on the issue are not recorded. This spectrum of views was typical of Anabaptism, revealing the divergent tendencies towards spiritualism and literalism.

However, despite this diversity, there was a coherent approach to biblical teaching on the oath. The following consideration of this will reveal the extent to which the six principles described in this study pervaded the movement.

The Schleithem Confession emphasised the importance of taking biblical teaching on this issue at face value. Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5 was quoted as self-evidently forbidding the swearing of oaths. "Christ is simply yea and nay, and all those who seek him simply will understand his Word"<sup>5</sup>. Those who taught a different interpretation of these verses were dismissed as those "who do not believe the simple commandment of God"<sup>6</sup>. Most Anabaptists felt this was sufficient without further argument. Menno wrote: "We are aware that the magistracy claims and says that we are allowed to swear when justice is on our side. We reply with the Word of

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<sup>5</sup>Yoder, Schleithem 18.

<sup>6</sup>Yoder, Schleithem 16.

the Lord very simply...the gospel forbids this to Christians"<sup>7</sup>. Rideman, likewise, quoted Matthew 5 and urged that swearing be avoided, because it was "clear to all men" that this was God's desire<sup>8</sup>.

To these Anabaptists, then, Scripture on this issue was clear and plain, requiring no extended discussion but simple obedience. They knew the Reformers pointed to other passages in both Testaments that seemed to challenge this rejection of the oath, but their Anabaptist Christocentrism required them to interpret these texts in the light of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5, rather than allowing such texts to dilute his teaching.

With regard to Old Testament texts, the Anabaptists argued that swearing oaths might have been acceptable for earlier generations living under old covenant law, but it was quite different now that Christ had come and taught the ways of God more clearly. The Schleithem Confession taught that "Christ, who teaches the perfection of the law, forbids his followers all swearing"<sup>9</sup>. The Confession noted Old Testament examples of oaths being sworn but argued this was no longer relevant for followers of Jesus. Menno agreed: "To swear truly was allowed to the Jews under the Law; but the gospel forbids this to Christians"<sup>10</sup>.

Rideman attempted to reconcile the teaching of the two Testaments by explaining that "swearing in the old covenant means in the new knowing God and cleaving to him alone"<sup>11</sup>. Using terminology that was popular among Anabaptists, "since the light of divine grace has appeared and been

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<sup>7</sup>Menno, Works 519.

<sup>8</sup>AIO 287.

<sup>9</sup>Yoder, Schleithem 16.

<sup>10</sup>Menno, Works 519.

<sup>11</sup>AIO 287.



revealed more brightly in Christ, the servants of the new covenant lay no longer upon us the shade but the glory of the light of truth in its clarity", Rideman argued that "God desired to show them by means of swearing by his name that there is no other truth, and that he who would walk in the truth must enter through the name of God and be established therein. That is what God desires to teach us by means of swearing in the old covenant"<sup>12</sup>. The Old Testament was not worthless, but it needed to be interpreted in the light of the New and of the new covenant. Once this was done it was found to be both in harmony with the New and profitable for Christians.

But there were other New Testament texts that the Reformers used to defend the practice of swearing oaths<sup>13</sup>. Anabaptists could not use the same argument here as with Old Testament texts. Instead they insisted on the priority of the Gospels and Jesus' teaching there, explaining other New Testament texts in the light of the Sermon on the Mount. The Schleithem Confession differentiated between oaths and testifying<sup>14</sup>, and Menno taught that calling God as a witness was not equivalent to swearing<sup>15</sup>, arguing that both James and Paul supported him in this. Other New Testament texts were thus not dismissed as inapplicable. Rather, their true meaning was established by interpreting them in the light of Jesus' explicit teaching.

The Anabaptists were under no illusions about the trouble which would result from refusing to swear oaths. But for them it was a question of

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<sup>12</sup>AIO 287.

<sup>13</sup>For example: Romans 1:9; Galatians 1:20; 2 Corinthians 1:23; 1 Thessalonians 2:5,10.

<sup>14</sup>Yoder, Schleithem 17.

<sup>15</sup>Menno, Works 521.



obeying God rather than human authorities. Unlike the Reformers, they were unwilling to drive a wedge between the private and public spheres. Menno asked, "What shall the conscientious Christian do ? If he swears he falls into the hand of the Lord. If he swears not, he will have to bear the disfavour and punishment of the magistracy"<sup>16</sup>. The likelihood of suffering was not persuasive, nor was the fact that rejecting the use of the oath struck at the foundations of the sacral state. The test of a true interpretation of Scripture was ethical. Hans Marquart taught: "Christ wanted a pure people who had put off all uncleanness. That is why he gave a clear commandment regarding the oath...they would confess and live the truth without additions with a pure heart"<sup>17</sup>.

Although the Anabaptists were content to rely on the simple words of Christ on this issue, they argued against the oath on ethical grounds also. To Marquart's teaching, that Christ wanted disciples who would speak and live the truth without unnecessary additions, should be added the Schleithem Confession's warning that oaths presupposed human pride and presumption. "We cannot perform what is promised in swearing, for we are not able to change the smallest part of ourselves"<sup>18</sup>. And Menno asked, "Can the truth not be told without oaths ? Do all testify to the truth even when under oath ?"<sup>19</sup> The Anabaptists were not convinced that swearing oaths was conducive to good ethics. This conviction supported their determination to obey what seemed to them Jesus' clear teaching on this

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<sup>16</sup>Menno, Works 519.

<sup>17</sup>AIO 286.

<sup>18</sup>Yoder, Schleithem 16.

<sup>19</sup>Menno, Works 924.

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Such obedience was regarded by them as feasible not in their own strength but through the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The influence of Anabaptist pneumatology on this issue related to their experience of the Spirit and their emphasis on the power available to believers to live holy lives. This meant that they regarded the use of oaths as inappropriate. Christians should always tell the truth, not only under oath. Even if the use of oaths was still necessary in society and in state churches where standards were lower, within Anabaptist congregations truth-telling was to be the norm. Rideman wrote: "God desires from us Christians a true worship performed in spirit and truth...therefore we are not only not to forswear ourselves, but we are not to swear at all"<sup>21</sup>.

Anabaptist writings show that this interpretation was reached communally and related primarily to their congregations. The article on the oath in the Schleithem Confession began with the phrase "We have been united as follows concerning the oath"<sup>22</sup>. This was true also among the South Germans who adopted a more relaxed approach to the issue. The record of Hut's interrogation noted that Hut discussed this with others before reaching a conclusion<sup>23</sup>. Opposition to the oath was ecclesiocentric not only in that it was agreed within Anabaptist congregations, but also in that it applied

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<sup>20</sup>The possibility of a conflict between the clear teaching of Jesus and the promotion of good ethics (ie if the swearing of oaths had been conducive to good ethics) does not seem to have been considered by the Anabaptists in relation to this or other issues. Their assumption was that the clear teachings of Jesus would inevitably be ethically preferable to anything else.

<sup>21</sup>AIO 287.

<sup>22</sup>AIO 283.

<sup>23</sup>AIO 285.



only to these congregations, not to the whole of society. Marquart wrote: "All who were planted into the body of the church through faith in Christ would not swear as the children of the world do"<sup>24</sup>. And the Schleithem Confession distinguished carefully between what was appropriate "within the perfection of Christ" and what pertained outside this.

Although most Anabaptists accepted the Schleithem position and this became the settled conviction among later generations, some, as noted above, took a less stringent view. Denck concluded, "Whatever one may in truth speak he may in fact also call God to witness for it. Much more may he do this with preachers as with holding up his hand and the like, and it makes little difference whether one calls it swearing or not; it was never in the mind of Christ to forbid this"<sup>25</sup>. The context of this statement shows that Denck accepted the Schleithem position that Jesus' teaching was normative and that the problem with swearing oaths was that it seemed presumptuous<sup>26</sup>. His view was that swearing oaths was only legitimate if it amounted to no more than "affirming things on the basis of God's grace"<sup>27</sup>, or asking for God's help in doing what was right. Unlike the Swiss Brethren, he had no objection to calling such activities "swearing oaths", provided their scope was carefully defined. As on other issues, his concern was with the spirit rather than the letter, but the end result was

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<sup>24</sup>AIO 286.

<sup>25</sup>AIO 285.

<sup>26</sup>This seems similar to the position of Hans Marquart: "I concede that one may call God to witness concerning what is past or present, but one may not swear...Further one may promise and pledge faith concerning the past and the present, but never concerning the future. That is because nothing is in our power but everything depends on the will of God": AIO 285.

<sup>27</sup>AIO 285.



little different.

It seems that Hans Hut was unwilling to insist on a strict avoidance of swearing oaths. A report of his interrogation in 1527 suggests that his position was that "swearing at the behest of the government is not against God. He will not swear, however, in anything that is against God"<sup>28</sup>. It is difficult to be sure from this report, however, to what extent Hut's position differed from that which he apparently accepted at Schleithem in the same year.

It is less easy still to know what position Marpeck took. His one writing on the issue has been lost<sup>29</sup>. From Strasbourg sources it appears that he opposed the oath but did not take the Swiss Brethren's position. A clue is provided by a report of the interrogation in 1550 of Jorg Maler, a Swiss Anabaptist who belonged to the Marpeck circle and who disagreed with the Swiss Brethren on this issue. It was reported that "he believed, and still does, that a Christian may swear an oath for the sake of the brothers and of love, and for the maintenance of justice and truth"<sup>30</sup>.

The general conclusion that emerges from extant Anabaptist writings on the oath is that they opposed it, either totally or with certain exceptions, on the simple grounds that Jesus forbade swearing and the Spirit empowered them to be truthful without the pressure of being under oath. They were prepared to suffer persecution for their obedience to what they regarded as the clear teaching of Scripture Christocentrically interpreted. There was some diversity of opinion on this issue, but at Scheithem many

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<sup>28</sup>AIO 285.

<sup>29</sup>Klaassen in AIO 282.

<sup>30</sup>AIO 288.

influential leaders had experienced the Spirit bringing them to agreement about the oath.

Perhaps the most obvious criticism of this position is that other passages in both Testaments that were relevant to the issue of the oath were not handled very adequately. It seems that they were regarded as basically in harmony with a "plain meaning" reading of the Sermon on the Mount. The Reformers, however, were not persuaded it was as simple as that. Nor was there any attempt to consider whether the meaning of the oath in the sixteenth century was equivalent to the meaning of the oath in the first century. This might have had important consequences for interpreting the various texts on the oath, but the Anabaptists' confidence that their *Sitz im Leben* was similar to that of the early churches precluded the asking of such a question.

Nevertheless, the Anabaptist position does offer an alternative to the dominant Protestant and Catholic teaching on this issue. This alternative is very attractive in the contemporary post-Constantinian situation where the swearing of oaths seems both anachronistic and ineffective. It is an alternative that refuses to sidestep the radical teaching of Jesus despite the personal and social implications. This alternative derived from the freedom from traditional interpretations and the consequent openness to fresh insights that characterised Anabaptist hermeneutics. The arguments presented to support this position can be seen to have involved an application of the six principles outlined in this study.

### Evaluation

Having summarised the six primary characteristics of Anabaptist hermeneu-



tics and their interaction, and having illustrated this by means of a case study, it remains to attempt a critical evaluation of this approach to biblical interpretation. Anabaptist hermeneutics was not a unified system. It developed in a piece-meal fashion under pressurised circumstances and among a variety of groups. Nevertheless, as indicated in this section, there were a number of common convictions which in practice produced a coherent and quite sophisticated approach to biblical interpretation, in which the various principles acted as checks and balances.

The relationship between the Anabaptist approach and that of the Reformers is quite complex, containing both reactive and proactive elements. Some Anabaptist principles and practices were derived from the Reformers, as the Anabaptists freely admitted. Among these were their emphasis on Scripture as self-interpreting and their commitment to the literal meaning of Scripture. Other principles were developed in opposition to the Reformers' principles, because of dissatisfaction with their implications. In particular, they emphasised Christocentrism and the priority of the New Testament, and insisted on an ethical filter being applied. Others again resulted from quite different understandings and expectations. The most significant of these were their congregational approach that derived from their very different ecclesiology, and the role ascribed to the Spirit that resulted from their more developed pneumatology.

Anabaptist hermeneutics cannot be fully understood or fairly evaluated in isolation from the interpretive principles and practices of the Reformers. It is not, however, legitimate to treat Anabaptist hermeneutics as merely derivative or peripheral, as has frequently been assumed. Some of the principles they developed were very different from those developed by the



Reformers, and the challenge they presented had a significant influence on the way the Reformers developed and qualified their own practices.

Nor should the Anabaptists' hermeneutical principles be regarded merely as a radicalising of the Reformers' ideas and practices, in the sense that they were pursuing the Reformers' principles to their logical conclusions. A careful examination of the six principles that characterised their approach to Scripture leads to the conclusion that some were radical extensions of the Reformers' hermeneutics, but that others demonstrated greater continuity with medieval practice.

Thus, with regard to the principle that Scripture is self-interpreting, the Anabaptists radicalised the Reformers' position, further eroding the influence of tradition, scholasticism and clericalism. Similarly, their insistence that obedience and application were vital to understanding Scripture seems to represent a radicalising position. However, some Reformers feared that the doctrine of justification by faith (which they regarded as truly radical) was being undermined by this ethical stance. The same concern was raised about the Anabaptists' Christocentrism. Their determination that Jesus should be normative for ethics and ecclesiology as well as soteriology implied a more radical approach than the Reformers, taking their professed Christological approach into new dimensions, but their emphasis on Jesus as example and teacher was seen by some Reformers as a dangerous retention of Catholic emphases on the imitation of Christ and a dilution of solafideism, leading to a less radical approach.

On the question of the relationship between the Testaments, the Anabaptist position, though not without antecedents, was more radical than medieval or Reformed practice, although their limited use of allegory and typology

to reclaim the Old Testament gave wider scope to medieval methods than many of the Reformers. The relationship between Spirit and Word was where the variety among the Anabaptists most clearly emerged. The Swiss Brethren adopted a more radically literal approach than the Reformers, but other groups gave more emphasis than any of the Reformers to the Spirit's role. This emphasis on the Spirit as interpreter did not, however, lead to the denigration of the literal sense of Scripture as it had often done in the past and continued to do in spiritualist circles. Their ability to hold in tension Spirit and Word was an important Anabaptist contribution, albeit one that has often been ignored or misinterpreted, and a perspective that was neither in continuity with earlier methods nor derived from the Reformers. Although the Reformers also acknowledged the Holy Spirit as the interpreter, Calvin especially, it was the Anabaptists who explored what this meant in practice.

The Anabaptists' hermeneutic community can be seen as a *via media* between the Catholic understanding of Scripture being subject to ecclesiastical interpretation and the Reformers' insistence that Scripture was free from such control. The Anabaptists agreed with the Reformers that Scripture governed the Church, but they agreed with the Catholics that the Church was the locus of interpretation. However, the difference in practice between the Catholic model and the Anabaptist hermeneutic communities was so great as to make the conceptual similarity insignificant. The hermeneutic community empowered and involved believers in the interpretive process in a way that neither the Catholics nor the Reformers would allow.

The synthetic model that can be extracted from these Anabaptist principles is of a Spirit-filled disciple, confidently reading Scripture within a



community of such disciples, aware that Jesus Christ is the centre from which the rest of Scripture must be interpreted. Characteristic of the Anabaptist approach was a challenge to the established authorities, Catholic and Reformed, ecclesiastical and political, to open the interpretation of Scripture to all Christians. They were determined to resist the disenfranchisement of ordinary believers and the domination of a powerful, educated elite, whose interpretation of Scripture they distrusted. There may be elements drawn from earlier models and others that represent a radicalising of the Reformers' ideas, but the result is a potent synthesis which led to markedly different understandings and uses of Scripture in the sixteenth century.

This approach was not, however, without its weaknesses, many of which have been noted in earlier sections. Among the more significant of these were the extent to which scholarship was marginalised<sup>31</sup>, depriving Anabaptist communities of helpful tools for interpreting Scripture; the inadequate handling of the Old Testament and lack of interest in the application of Scripture to the wider society; and the tendency towards literalism and legalism that hindered a more sophisticated approach to certain issues that was not necessary equated with dilution and evasion.

It is arguable, however, that even these inadequacies contain important warnings. The development of a more sophisticated and nuanced methodology has historically demonstrated the relevance of the Anabaptists' concern

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<sup>31</sup>It is difficult to see how the Anabaptists could have done anything about this. Their trained leaders were executed and the universities were closed to them. But the absence of scholars from their ranks, however understandable, was a significant weakness in their hermeneutics.



about dilution and evasion. The history of the interpretation of the Old Testament and its use to justify many practices that cannot be supported on New Testament grounds provides support for their concern about its misuse. And the relationship between scholars and congregations has still not been satisfactorily resolved.

In the final section, suggestions will be made concerning the contemporary significance of Anabaptist hermeneutics. These are not based on an assumption that the Anabaptist approach has no weaknesses. But it will be argued that Anabaptist hermeneutics has a distinctive contribution to make, a contribution which has been largely ignored for centuries, but which may interact creatively and helpfully with the hermeneutical system that developed from the Reformers' principles and practices, and with several contemporary challenges to this system that have much in common with the Anabaptist challenge of 450 years earlier.

## A. Introduction

The assumption that Anabaptist hermeneutics was unsophisticated and has little to contribute to contemporary hermeneutical issues is a natural concomitant to the prevailing neglect and dismissal of Anabaptism. The gradual rehabilitation of Anabaptism, however, and the discovery of its relevance to various topics and within diverse traditions<sup>1</sup> justifies a reexamination of this assumption. Anabaptist convictions both shaped their hermeneutics and emerged from the way they read Scripture. The attention given now to Anabaptist perspectives on doctrinal, ecclesiological and ethical issues<sup>2</sup> encourages investigation of the hermeneutics that undergirded these perspectives.

This investigation is also timely in the light of various contemporary hermeneutical developments. The long-dominant historical-critical method, built on the Reformers' legacy and developed over the past two centuries by European scholars, is under fire from many directions<sup>3</sup>. Though few critics advocate its abandonment, many want its limitations acknowledged and its contribution set in a wider and more appropriate context. Various proposals have been made, but there has been little critical examination of the Reformation roots of this system, or exploration of possible

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<sup>1</sup>See above at pp13-19.

<sup>2</sup>See the summary above at pp16-18.

<sup>3</sup>David Scholer has concluded, "The historical-critical method has fallen on hard times. It has been subjected, both from the 'right' and the 'left' to various critiques, denunciations and renunciations": Scholer, David M: "Issues in Biblical Interpretation" *Evangelical Quarterly* LX 9. See further above at p20 and below at pp439ff.

alternatives. Anabaptist hermeneutics developed contemporaneously with the Reformers' hermeneutics. Although owing much to the Reformers' methodology and agreeing with them on many issues, it embodied an alternative approach that recognised limitations in the Reformers' hermeneutics and advocated a different interpretive context. A reappraisal of this sixteenth century alternative will provide unexpected historical support for contemporary attempts to address the limitations of the historical-critical method, by revealing weaknesses in the method's Reformation roots and by offering perspectives that are similar to those advocated by contemporary critics.

The recovery of this alternative Anabaptist approach also offers fresh insights on certain significant hermeneutical issues. Some hermeneutical issues debated by Reformers and Anabaptists in the sixteenth century still await satisfactory resolution. These include the relationships between Old and New Testaments, between congregations and scholarship, and between interpretation and application. Solutions based on the Reformers' position have not commanded universal support<sup>4</sup>. The Anabaptists' views have rarely been considered, but there are significant parallels between their views and contemporary challenges to the Reformers' position. The neglected Anabaptist approach to these issues may not provide all the answers, but their writings do provide a helpful historical perspective, reinforcing some contemporary approaches and suggesting refinements to others.

Anabaptist hermeneutics developed, as did the Reformers', at a crucial juncture in church history. Hermeneutical developments in the sixteenth century were inextricably linked with the ecclesiological changes taking

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<sup>4</sup>See above at p24.



place. Similarly, contemporary hermeneutical debate cannot take place in isolation from significant global ecclesiological changes. During the twentieth century, three such changes have occurred: the transfer of the centre of gravity of Christianity from Europe and North America to Asia, Africa and Latin America<sup>5</sup>; the phenomenal growth of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements<sup>6</sup>; and the disintegration or transmutation of the centuries-old alliance between Church and State sometimes referred to as the "Constantinian synthesis"<sup>7</sup>. These ecclesiological developments all have hermeneutical implications, and with each there are significant parallels with Anabaptist hermeneutics, enabling this approach to Scripture, hammered out in the turbulence of the early sixteenth century, to contribute insights to those in the late twentieth century who are facing similar turbulence and similar hermeneutical issues.

From non-European scholars have come searching critiques of European hermeneutical presuppositions and of methods once assumed to be objective but now accused of ethnocentricity and ideological bias<sup>8</sup>. From Third World

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<sup>5</sup>Extensive evidence for this is contained in Barrett, David: World Christian Encyclopaedia (Oxford: OUP, 1982) and Johnstone, Patrick J: Operation World (Bromley: STL Books, 1978). See also Pierson, Paul: "Non-Western Missions: The Great New Fact of our Time", in Sookhdeo, Patrick (ed): New Frontiers in Mission (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1987) 9; and Andrew Walls, cited in Sugden, Christopher: Radical Discipleship (Basingstoke: Marshalls, 1981) 19.

<sup>6</sup>See various articles in Global Church Growth (Oct-Dec 1991). The whole issue is devoted to examining the growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity and the missiological implications of this. See also Maroney, Jimmy: "Significant Christian Megatrends for the 90's and Beyond" The Link Vol 1 No 4 (1990). Maroney suggests a projected figure of 562 million charismatics worldwide by 2000 AD.

<sup>7</sup>Evidence for this change is presented below at pp325-6.

<sup>8</sup>See below at pp346ff.

Christianity have emerged stimulating examples of grass-roots hermeneutics that challenge the monopoly of scholars and academic methodologies<sup>9</sup>.

Although a European phenomenon, Anabaptism rejected many of the prevailing ideological commitments of European society and developed a hermeneutic appropriate for a movement of the poor, powerless and oppressed. This hermeneutic resembles contemporary Third World developments and provides a sixteenth century vantage point from which to assess both these developments and the current European position.

From the burgeoning Pentecostal and Charismatic churches has come a renewed emphasis on pneumatology that has hermeneutical implications which have not yet been adequately explored. In Pentecostalism, fundamentalist approaches to biblical interpretation have been predominant. But the Charismatic Movement has been less fundamentalist and more aware of certain hermeneutical issues, in particular the need to hold together "Word" and "Spirit", challenging practices that appear to circumscribe the Spirit's role in biblical interpretation<sup>10</sup>. The development and articulation of an appropriate hermeneutic for this rapidly growing segment of the world church is vital. As a sixteenth century "charismatic" movement which faced the danger of fundamentalism and where the relationship between "Word" and "Spirit" was extensively explored<sup>11</sup>, Anabaptism offers insights to assist in developing an appropriate hermeneutic for charismatic congregations and in building relationships between these congregations and others whose emphasis is on the "Word".

The third development is quite complex. In many nations, the future of

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<sup>9</sup>See below at pp348-9.

<sup>10</sup>See below at p389.

<sup>11</sup>See above at pp184ff.



Christianity seems unavoidably to require the adoption of a "free church" model, where Church and State are separate. This has hermeneutical implications, since most interpreters in the past 1500 years have operated within a Constantinian framework and were influenced by Constantinian assumptions. The Constantinian era was not just a historical phase but a mindset. The methods used and conclusions reached by interpreters were undoubtedly influenced by these Constantinian presuppositions. The demise of Constantinianism requires a critical reexamination of the hermeneutics which predominated in this period and the development of a hermeneutics that is more appropriate for post-Constantinian interpreters.

It is interesting that in some nations, notably the United States of America, Constantinian attitudes are thriving despite a theoretical separation between Church and State, reflecting the pervasiveness of the Constantinian mindset whatever the political arrangements. Elsewhere "neo-Constantinianism" is emerging, especially in the new democracies of Eastern Europe and under the influence of liberation theology in Latin America. It is arguable that the absence of a convincing alternative hermeneutics is, at least partly, responsible for the survival and transmutation of Christendom.

The Anabaptists, unlike the Reformers, rejected Constantinianism and adopted a hermeneutic that reflected this in its presuppositions, methods and conclusions. This hermeneutic offers to contemporary interpreters an approach to biblical interpretation that has historical roots as long as the Reformers' approach but a perspective that is much more appropriate for interpreting the Bible for post-Constantinian churches and societies.



Anabaptist hermeneutics also provides a challenge to Christians in the so-called "free churches" to refrain from interpreting Scripture in ways that endorse "unofficial" Constantinianism. And where the old Constantinian assumptions are emerging in transmuted forms, Anabaptist hermeneutics warns against illegitimate uses of Scripture to undergird Constantinian strategies and programmes.

The contemporary significance of Anabaptist hermeneutics, then, does not consist in the degree to which it has influenced contemporary interpreters. Such influence has been minimal (although instances will be noted in the following sections). Rather, its relevance is related to a number of parallels: between Anabaptist perspectives and those discernible in a number of contemporary movements; between the issues faced by Anabaptists and those faced by contemporary interpreters; between the ecclesiological changes taking place in the sixteenth and twentieth centuries; and between the solutions proposed by the Anabaptists to certain hermeneutical problems and those being suggested by contemporary interpreters.

The intention in the following sections is to draw out these parallels and to assess the contribution that Anabaptist hermeneutics could make to contemporary interpreters. In some cases this contribution will be to undergird and endorse a contemporary approach. In other cases Anabaptist perspectives clarify the issues involved and suggest refinements of solutions proposed. There is no attempt here at an exhaustive survey of the actual or potential significance of Anabaptist hermeneutics. The comparisons made and issues addressed have been selected on the basis of three criteria: the contemporary significance of the movements and issues chosen; the existence of demonstrable and informative parallels between

contemporary developments and the Anabaptist experience; and the potential of Anabaptist hermeneutics to contribute constructively to contemporary hermeneutical developments.

## B. Anabaptism and Non-Constantinian Hermeneutics

Reference was made previously to Constantinianism with only minimal definition and detail<sup>12</sup>. Although the focus here is on the hermeneutical implications of Constantinianism, a brief analysis of the main features of Constantinianism and of the evidence for its demise or transfiguration in the twentieth century is necessary.

The term refers historically to the embracing of Christianity by the Roman Emperor Constantine early in the fourth century as the official imperial religion. Phenomenologically, however, it denotes an understanding of Christianity that partially pre-dated<sup>13</sup> Constantine, was confirmed by his successors, and is the mindset which has dominated Western church history. Assessments of the changes that occurred during this period (roughly late second to fourth century) vary from enthusiastic endorsement, through grudging acceptance, to complete rejection. But there is general agreement that these changes were radical and produced the "Christian Europe" that endured for over 1500 years.

Familiar and fundamental features of Constantinianism include Christianity as the official religion of city, state or empire; the assumption that all

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<sup>12</sup>See above at p18.

<sup>13</sup>Moltmann, Crucified 325; Sobrino, Jon: Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach (London: SCM Press, 1976) 294ff; Bosch, David J: Witness to the World (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1980) 93, 102.



citizens (except for the Jews) are Christian by birth; the imposition of a supposedly Christian morality on the entire population<sup>14</sup>; a division of the globe into "Christendom" and "heathendom"; the defence of Christianity by legal sanctions to restrain heresy, immorality and schism, and by warfare to protect or extend Christendom; a hierarchical ecclesiastical system, based on a diocesan and parish arrangement, analogous to the state hierarchy and buttressed by state support; a generic distinction between clergy and laity; infant baptism as the symbol of incorporation into the *corpus Christianum*<sup>15</sup>; and obligatory tithes to fund this system. The basis of the Constantinian synthesis is a symbiotic relationship between Church and State. Its form may vary, with either partner dominant or with a balance of power existing between them. But the Church is associated with the status quo and has vested interests in its maintenance.

It is not easy to fit into the Constantinian framework certain key elements of the Christianity of the New Testament and the first three centuries<sup>16</sup>. Constantinian thinking has no place for such New Testament ideas as believers' churches comprised only of committed disciples; a clear distinction between "church" and "world"; evangelism and mission

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<sup>14</sup>Although normally Old Testament moral standards are applied. See also the discussion of "moralism" in Littell, State 195ff.

<sup>15</sup>Walter Klaassen has suggested infant baptism was the "motor" of Constantinianism rather than just a symbol. See Klaassen: "The Anabaptist Critique of Constantinian Christendom" MQR LV 223. I am not convinced that historically or theologically it had such significance.

<sup>16</sup>Leonard Verduin discussed many of these issues in his book, The Reformers and their Stepchildren. See especially 36, 47, 74, 83, 96, 119.



(except through military conquest of or missions to "heathen" nations)<sup>17</sup>; believers' baptism as the symbol of incorporation into the *corpus Christi*; the supra-national vision of the new Christian "nation"; and faith as the exercise of choice in a pluralistic environment. Other elements are redefined. "Church" is defined territorially and the voluntary communities called "churches" in the New Testament are now called "sects"<sup>18</sup>; a pre-occupation with the immortality of the soul replaces the expectation of the kingdom of God, and the concept of the kingdom of God is reduced to a purely historical entity, coterminous with the state church<sup>19</sup>; the Church abandons its prophetic role in society in favour of an exclusively priestly role, sanctifying social occasions and state policies; and persecution is imposed by those claiming to be Christians rather than upon them.

Supporters of Constantinianism argue that this system enables the Lordship of Christ to be exercised over every aspect of society and demonstrates the triumph of the gospel<sup>20</sup>. Opponents consider that this "victory" was

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<sup>17</sup>On this, see Stephen Neill's second Bampton Lecture for 1964, entitled "The Missionary Dimension", in Neill, Stephen: The Church and Christian Union (London: OUP, 1968) 71-113; and Shenk, Wilbert: "The Culture of Modernity as a Missionary Challenge" (unpublished paper) 1-8.

<sup>18</sup>See Franklin Littell's comments on the use of this terminology by Ernst Troeltsch, in Littell, State xxiv-xxv.

<sup>19</sup>Shenk, "Culture" 3; Bosch, Witness 4.

<sup>20</sup>This was the basis of the early historian Eusebius' approval of Constantine. See the comments on his work in Neill, Church 110-1. See also Verduin's comments on the Reformers' appreciation of the Constantinian change: Verduin, Reformers 74, 83.

achieved at the expense of compromising on important issues<sup>21</sup> and that, in fact, Christianity has been conquered and domesticated. Rather than society being sanctified, the Church has been secularised<sup>22</sup>. Others suggest the Church had no option in the fourth century but to accept imperial endorsement and that Constantinianism, despite its excesses, was a providential means of Christianising culture and advancing God's kingdom<sup>23</sup>.

However the period since Constantine is assessed, evidence is accumulating of a transition from a Constantinian to a post-Constantinian situation<sup>24</sup>. The percentage of the population attending state churches is now very small in many European nations<sup>25</sup>. Frequent calls are heard, even from

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<sup>21</sup>Jurgen Moltmann wrote that for this victory "the church had to pay a high price: it had to take over the role of the political religion...Now the church was there for everyone. Its mission reached everywhere. But as what ? It reached everyone only as a component part of the political order - as the state religion of the political government": Moltmann, Jurgen: The Power of the Powerless (London: SCM Press, 1983) 158.

<sup>22</sup>Klaassen, "Anabaptist" 229; Moltmann, Crucified 250; Kee, Alistair: Christ Versus Constantine (London: SCM Press, 1982) 154.

<sup>23</sup>Lesslie Newbigin concluded: "How else, at that moment of history, could the Church have expressed its faithfulness to the Gospel which is a message about the universal reign of God ? It is hard to see what other possibility there was at that moment. The experiment of a Christian political order had to be made": Newbigin, Lesslie: The Other Side of 1984 (Geneva: WCC, 1983) 34. See also an expanded assessment of Constantinianism along similarly positive lines in Newbigin, Lesslie: Foolishness to the Greeks (London: SPCK, 1986) 100-1.

<sup>24</sup>This evidence is summarised in Brown, "Radical" 252-3.

<sup>25</sup>See Brierley, Peter: "The Changing Church Scene in Western Europe" Church Growth Digest (Spring 1992) 3. This article draws on the extensive research carried out by MARC Europe and reported in such volumes as Brierley, Peter: 'Christian' England (London, MARC 1991).



within state churches<sup>26</sup>, for disestablishment, for changes to the parish system<sup>27</sup> and to the practice of infant baptism. Few missiologists now divide the world into "Christian" and "pagan" nations<sup>28</sup>, and the growth of non-Christian religions in Europe is forcing churches to explore the implications of witness in a pluralistic society<sup>29</sup>. From within the established churches many voices are recognising and welcoming this transition<sup>30</sup>.

Given its long history in Europe and its all-pervasive nature, the demise of Constantinianism is unlikely to be sudden or total. Even when the official relationship between Church and State is dissolved, the Constantinian mindset within the churches (and within society) will persist and many will seek a return to a supposedly more "Christian" society<sup>31</sup>. Nor will it be possible to eradicate from post-Constantinian society all the

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<sup>26</sup>Early examples are Canon Walter Hobhouse's Bampton Lectures in 1909 and Archbishop Emmanuel Suhard in 1930. See Shenk, "Culture" 3.

<sup>27</sup>Recently referred to by Bishop David Pytches as "the condom of the Church of England" (quoted in *The Independent* 4 March 1991 p6).

<sup>28</sup>Shenk, "Culture" 5-8.

<sup>29</sup>Littell, State 197.

<sup>30</sup>Franklin Littell quoted a Lutheran bishop, Gunter Jacob, who declared in 1956: "Aware spirits characterize the situation in contemporary Europe by the fact that the end of the Constantinian epoch has arrived": Littell, Church 56. See also above at p326, footnote26.

<sup>31</sup>Franklin Littell warned that "the tendency to slip back into the assumptions of Christendom is ever present": Littell, State 146. David Bosch commented that "there are even to this day regions and communities where for all practical purposes the population still thinks and acts in Constantinian categories": Bosch, Witness 4.



vestiges of its Constantinian past<sup>32</sup>. What does need to be challenged, if not eradicated, is the distorting influence of the Constantinian mindset on biblical interpretation. It is this mindset rather than a political arrangement that is the heart of Christendom.

For three quarters of its history the Church has operated within a Constantinian framework. Only in the first three centuries, in persecuted movements between the fourth and nineteenth centuries, and in the last century has this mindset been challenged. Constantinian presuppositions have influenced every aspect of the life of the churches, including hermeneutics<sup>33</sup>. From early in the Constantinian era, it became clear that the Bible would need to be interpreted in the light of the new realities. The resultant hermeneutical changes became established as orthodox and provided constant reinforcement of the system and ways of evading biblical challenges to it.

It was soon recognised that it was impractical to require the whole population to accept New Testament ethics, so Old Testament norms were adopted for all except the monastic orders<sup>34</sup>. Church leaders also realised

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<sup>32</sup>Nor would this necessarily be desirable. Over many centuries practices have become embedded in European cultures that originated in Constantinianism but which no longer depend on this basis.

<sup>33</sup>Alistair Kee concluded that "after Constantine, it is the church under the sway of imperial values which now provides the perspective for reading the Bible": Kee, Christ 168.

<sup>34</sup>Augustine's defence of the introduction of the tithing model into the churches is a good example of this: see Gonzales, Justo L: Faith and Wealth (New York: Harper & Row, 1990) 219, 227. Verduin suggested the term "conductual-averagism" to describe the moral expectation within Christendom: Verduin, Reformers 96ff.

that the New Testament provided no guidelines for organising the kind of sacral society or hierarchical Church which was emerging, but they found many helpful structures in the Old Testament. Consequently, the authority of the Old Testament grew and New Testament teaching tended to be regarded as applicable only in the religious orders, in the eschatological kingdom, or as unreachable ideals.

In particular, the increasing distance between Jesus' lifestyle and that of church leaders necessitated a marginalisation of the humanity of Jesus. It was no longer acceptable to see him as the example Christians should imitate<sup>35</sup>. Consequently, in the fourth century, Jesus was recast as a celestial figure, his divinity was emphasised and the dangerous memory of the Nazarene was allowed to fade. This is evident from an analysis of fourth century creeds<sup>36</sup>, hymns, church calendars and catechisms<sup>37</sup>. Fourth century sermons and writings demonstrate an abandonment of Christocentric biblical interpretation. The life of Christ was used devotionally rather than ethically.

These same sermons demonstrate the impact of the disappearance of the distinction between "church" and "world" on biblical interpretation. Major New Testament themes such as the kingdom of God no longer seemed

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<sup>35</sup>David Bosch wrote that "the Church became wealthy and no longer quite knew what she ought to do with the message of Jesus (especially the Sermon on the Mount)": Bosch, Witness 4.

<sup>36</sup>For comments on the creeds, see Reimer, "Authority" 139-40.

<sup>37</sup>The catechetical instructions of Ambrose, for example, are based on Old Testament morality (see Ambrose: De Mysteriis 1.1); whereas catechumens used to be taught to apply Jesus' teachings (see Justin: Apology 1:14-16; or the Didache ch 1-6).



significant. The Great Commission seemed to have been fulfilled<sup>38</sup>. The Sitz im Leben of the early Christians seemed so removed from Christendom that it was difficult to understand New Testament teaching on many issues<sup>39</sup>. The blurring of the distinction between church and world resulted in New Testament passages such as Romans 13 being interpreted in ways that reflected the requirements of Christendom. The persistence of this approach to Romans 13 and other New Testament passages on the state is a key component of the enduring Constantinian mindset that will outlast Christendom as a political arrangement.

Having accepted the support of the political authorities, and having interpreted this support as providential, the Church quite naturally began to adjust its hermeneutics to reflect the new status quo. Scripture tended, therefore, to be interpreted in such a way as to maintain the existing order which benefited both Church and State. Furthermore, the dominant position of the Church within society significantly affected the presuppositions with which it approached Scripture<sup>40</sup>. Whatever other

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<sup>38</sup>See Dale Brown's comments on the missiological implications of the Anabaptists' rejection of Constantinianism, in Brown: "Radical" 252. See also Neill, Church 111.

<sup>39</sup>Walter Klaassen gave as an example the teaching on church discipline: "Refusal to acknowledge a fundamental difference between church and world...meant that Constantinian Christendom had nowhere to banish those excluded from the church. The only options were to send them to some other of the many christendoms of the sixteenth century, to remove them from society by incarcerating them, or to kill them": Klaassen, "Anabaptist" 229.

<sup>40</sup>This critique of Constantinian hermeneutics has been made repeatedly and convincingly by liberation theologians. See, for example: Boff, Leonardo: Church - Charism and Power (London: SCM Press, 1985) 59; Gutierrez, Gustavo: The Power of the Poor in History (London: SCM Press, 1983) 18.



hermeneutical principles were operating, a political hermeneutic was highly influential.

This was the situation, both politically and hermeneutically, that faced Reformers and Anabaptists in the sixteenth century. The Reformers appear to have moved through three stages in their opposition to the Catholic establishment. Initially, they criticised blatant abuses and immorality without urging schism. They seem then to have accepted the inevitability of separation and to have toyed with radical ideas about the nature of the Church<sup>41</sup>. Finally, having secured the support of certain political authorities, they set up alternative expressions of Christendom that removed objectionable features but maintained the basic Constantinian framework<sup>42</sup>. David Bosch concluded that the area of the relationship between Church and State "was redefined in a more nuanced way, yet with little fundamental difference. The old, monolithic Christendom merely gave way to different fragments of Christendom"<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup>See above at pp228-9.

<sup>42</sup>Walter Klaassen commented: "Luther cleared the ideological way for the ascendancy of the government over the church, thus simply reversing the Roman claim that the church should have primacy over the government. Although the positions were reversed, the symbiotic ties between the two remained in place. In Zwinglian Zürich the attempt was made to balance the functions of the two ministries in Christendom. Zwingli taught that the government was absolutely essential for the church...Zwingli had argued that 'elder' in the primitive church meant not only preacher but secular ruler...Hence Zwingli was able to identify a Christian city directly as a Christian church": Klaassen, "Anabaptist" 221. And Jurgen Moltmann wrote: "The Protestant established churches in Germany are together called a *Volkskirche* - a church for the whole people. In word and spirit they certainly stem from the Reformation. But their public form goes back to the turning-point under Constantine": Moltmann, Power 158. See also Verduin, Reformers 74, 83.

<sup>43</sup>Bosch, Witness 120.

Hermeneutically, they introduced changes but they did not escape the Constantinian mindset which had dominated biblical interpretation for centuries. By rejecting the monastic option they removed the two-tier approach to discipleship<sup>44</sup>, but they did not reassert New Testament morality as the standard. By emphasising justification by faith they focused attention on the New Testament and on Jesus as redeemer, but they would not allow Jesus to be normative for ethics as well as soteriology<sup>45</sup>. Though they insisted on the freedom of biblical interpretation from the scrutiny of political or ecclesiastical authorities, in practice they often deferred to these authorities<sup>46</sup>. They continued to operate with a "hermeneutic of order"<sup>47</sup>. Their laudable attempts to apply Scripture to the whole of life were undermined by their wariness of interpretations that might threaten the social, political and economic status quo. And they continued to find in the Old Testament guidelines for the new

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<sup>44</sup>Although it is arguable that Luther reintroduced this in a transmuted way through his doctrine of the "two kingdoms" that endorsed different standards for private and public morality.

<sup>45</sup>See above at pp125ff.

<sup>46</sup>See above at p50.

<sup>47</sup>A term used by José Miguez Bonino and contrasted unfavourably with a "hermeneutic of justice". He wrote: "If we accept this hermeneutical key for an understanding of the theological determination of priorities, then the question of the Constantinian church has to be turned completely around. The true question is not 'what degree of justice...is compatible with the existing order?', but 'what kind of order, which order is compatible with the exercise of justice...?'" See Bonino, José Miguez: Towards a Christian Political Ethics (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 82ff.



Christendoms they built<sup>48</sup>.

The Anabaptists came to realise that reforming the state church system was inadequate and that forming believers' churches was essential<sup>49</sup>. They comprehensively rejected Constantinianism and its symbols<sup>50</sup>. This radical stance enabled them to interpret Scripture in new ways<sup>51</sup>. They too rejected two-tier Christianity with different standards and callings for different Christians, but, unlike the Reformers, they chose to apply New Testament standards to all Christians. Instead of a two-tier Christendom, they recovered the "two kingdoms" approach of the New Testament<sup>52</sup> and

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<sup>48</sup>J L Houlden wrote: "Protestant culture...saw a revival of attention to the OT in its own right. Especially in Calvinist societies like the Netherlands and Scotland, the OT came to be used less as only the precursor of Christ than as the independent source of symbols and moral examples for the enriching and interpreting of personal and national life": Houlden, "Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament" in Coggins & Houlden, Dictionary 110-1.

<sup>49</sup>Although the earliest Anabaptists seem to have hoped that a thorough reformation of the state churches might be achieved, they were soon disillusioned. As they reflected on this, they seem to have arrived quite quickly at the conclusion that the "fall" of the church at the time of Constantine was the chief issue, with infant baptism as its symbol. Although Hubmaier continued to operate for a while within a state church context, this was unusual among the Anabaptists. The neo-Constantinian experiment at Münster seems to have removed all further toying with such options among the Anabaptists. See Klaassen: "Anabaptist" 222-3.

<sup>50</sup>Klaassen, "Anabaptist" 225; Littell, Origins 46ff.

<sup>51</sup>Although arguably the way they read Scripture contributed to their rejection of Constantinianism. On this, see Rutschman: "Anabaptism and Liberation Theology", in Schipani, Freedom 60. Elsewhere, Rutschman has suggested that a hermeneutical circle was operative in this process: see Rutschman, "Anabaptism" 264.

<sup>52</sup>Unlike Luther's version, the Anabaptists distinguished between believers and unbelievers rather than believers operating in different spheres.



argued that for Christians Jesus was the norm for ethics as well as for salvation. The Old Testament might still be relevant within society, but within believers' churches the New Testament governed ecclesiology and ethics. And New Testament teachings were to be obeyed whatever their social implications. Anabaptism rejected interpretations of Romans 13 that seemed to require excessive deference to the political authorities and operated not with a "hermeneutics of order" but with a "hermeneutics of obedience"<sup>53</sup>. Unlike the Reformers, they were not in a dominant position. Their *Sitz im Lieben* seemed analogous to the persecuted churches of the first three centuries<sup>54</sup>, and their interpretation of Scripture resembled pre-Constantinian interpretations more than those of the Reformers or most interpreters since Constantine.

Despite their vehement rejection of Constantinianism, however, Anabaptists retained certain features of this system. Woven as it was into the warp and woof of their society, they were unable in one generation even to identify all its manifestations, let alone break free of these. Their hermeneutics continued to rely unwittingly on the Constantinian framework necessary for their commitment to the "plain sense" of Scripture<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup>Or "hermeneutics of discipleship". A J Klassen has written: "A Biblical hermeneutic of discipleship will serve to clarify the Constantinian confusion of church and society and help us to recognize that the salt of discipleship is most effective in the soup of the world": see Klassen, Consultation 120.

<sup>54</sup>Although they were persecuted by others who claimed to be Christians rather than by an avowedly pagan empire, Anabaptists regarded such persecution as incompatible with true Christianity and so saw their experience as analogous to the early Christians. The true Church was always liable to such treatment, whatever the lineaments of the persecutors. The issue of different kinds of persecution will be explored further below at p430.

<sup>55</sup>On this, see above at p90.

Without a society where Christian practices were familiar, many biblical passages would not have been as susceptible to the "plain sense" approach that they advocated. In other societies, people without a knowledge of Hebrew culture and history would not be able to interpret Scripture in the way that uneducated Anabaptists could as a result of their Constantinian context (although it is arguable that this context is responsible equally for misinterpretations by both educated and uneducated interpreters, who confidently assume that they know what Scripture means on the basis of erroneous Constantinian applications).

However, Anabaptist hermeneutics offers an alternative and long neglected approach to biblical interpretation based largely on non-Constantinian presuppositions<sup>56</sup>, as a comparison of their presuppositions and convictions with the distinctive features of Constantinianism demonstrates. Once discovered, it seems likely that such a hermeneutics will be greatly appreciated. Already the conclusions to which their hermeneutics led the Anabaptists on various issues, particularly in the areas of ecclesiology and ethics, are seen as more appropriate in the contemporary post-Constantinian situation than the Reformers' conclusions. Their vision of non-hierarchical believers' churches is shared by an increasing proportion of global Christianity. The Church's missionary and prophetic calling, to

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<sup>56</sup>It is not claimed here that the Anabaptists had consciously developed a "non-Constantinian" hermeneutics, but that they had identified the Constantinian synthesis as pernicious and suspected biblical interpretation that operated under its auspices. Their presuppositions were different and related to their believers' church ecclesiology. The hermeneutics that developed was essentially "non-Constantinian" even if the Anabaptists did not describe it in this way. On the Anabaptist analysis of Constantinianism, see Klaassen, "Anabaptist" 222ff; Littell, Origins 46ff.



which Anabaptism drew attention, is now accepted widely even among those who still operate within state churches<sup>57</sup>. And Anabaptist views on warfare, truth-telling, economics and community are gaining acceptance in many quarters.

Acceptance of Anabaptist convictions has not generally been accompanied by an explicit adoption of Anabaptist hermeneutics. Indeed, few have been aware of the existence of such a hermeneutics. Nor is the growing acceptance of Anabaptist convictions in itself evidence of their truth, or of the validity of the hermeneutics undergirding them. But this acceptance of Anabaptist ideas does suggest that Anabaptist hermeneutics might be considered worthy of investigation. If found trustworthy, it will provide a more secure hermeneutical basis for the views that have already been adopted and may open up analogous approaches to biblical teaching on other issues.

A key element in Anabaptist hermeneutics, which is of particular relevance in post-Constantinian settings, is its enfranchisement of all believers as interpreters. The confident assertion that Scripture is self-interpreting may inspire those who have been intimidated by scholarly and ecclesiastical authority but who are struggling to respond to their new freedom in a less hierarchical setting. Locating interpretive authority in the local congregation and trusting the Spirit to instruct those who seek to understand Scripture together encourages those whose ecclesiology and experience of the Spirit mean that reliance on establishment scholars is

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<sup>57</sup>Although it is frequently assumed that this is a Reformation insight rather than an area where the Anabaptists disagreed with the Reformers. On this, see Neill, Church 75.



felt to be inadequate or even illegitimate<sup>58</sup>. The Anabaptist suspicion of ideological influences and freedom to critique traditional interpretations may also be liberating.

Other aspects of Anabaptist hermeneutics that are particularly relevant to post-Constantinianism include its commitment to Christocentrism, its emphasis on discipleship as the goal of interpretation, and its use of the theme of the kingdom of God as a hermeneutical key. The insistence on recognising Jesus as the centre of Scripture and on adopting New Testament norms for ethics and ecclesiology may assist contemporary Christians to rediscover the Jesus whom Christendom marginalised and to avoid the misleading and sub-Christian use of the Old Testament<sup>59</sup>. The focus on a hermeneutic of obedience and the determination to include application in the interpretive process encourages and endorses the interpreting of Scripture in believers' churches whose primary concern is with discipleship rather than intellectual comprehension<sup>60</sup>. And the theme of the kingdom of God, which was significant in Anabaptist hermeneutics and which

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<sup>58</sup>Although the effects of the absence of scholars among the Anabaptists should also act as a warning. On this, see below at p424.

<sup>59</sup>Although Anabaptist hermeneutics is weak on the provision of alternative uses of the Old Testament. On this, see further below at pp444ff.

<sup>60</sup>A J Klassen wrote: "A Biblical hermeneutic of discipleship will serve to clarify the Constantinian confusion of church and society...A biblical hermeneutic of discipleship will not allow a double standard that divides the people of God into clergy who will obey and a laity who do not. It will not accept a division of time that tolerates disobedience in the present on the promise of obedience in the millenium. It will expose the hypocrisy of bowing at the shrine of Caesar in the name of allegiance to Christ": Klassen, Consultation 120-1.

has has been rediscovered by many contemporary movements, is of fundamental importance in the struggle to retain the distinction between church and world without abdicating responsibility for society (a struggle in which the Anabaptists were not entirely successful in spite of their identification of the kingdom theme as vital - here their hermeneutical insights went beyond their ability to apply certain biblical themes and teachings).

Anabaptist hermeneutics is relevant also to what might be called "crypto-Constantinianism". The idea of a "Christian country" is still popular in Christian thinking, preaching and writing, and the temptation to yearn for a revival of Christendom, albeit shorn of certain less honourable features, is strong<sup>61</sup>. Nostalgic desires to "recover our Christian heritage" and the resurgence of "kingdom language" and triumphalism in many "free church" circles<sup>62</sup> indicate the persistence of the Constantinian mindset. This mindset is the basis for what John Yoder has described as "Constantinian reflexes" which lead to predictable hermeneutical and

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<sup>61</sup>Littell, State 146.

<sup>62</sup>Orlando Costas warned: "The memory of the Crusades, Western Constantinianism, the conquest of the Americas, the liberal-capitalist movement, and the ideology of Manifest Destiny are too fresh in our collective Christian memory to take lightly the warning of a neo-Christendom hiding beneath a resurgent Lordship and kingdom imagery among contemporary Christians". See Costas: "A Radical Evangelical Contribution from Latin America", in Anderson & Stransky, Lordship 165. Even in so-called "radical" church circles concepts such as "reclaiming the land" and "taking the nation for Jesus" are endemic, as their hymnody and the popularity of the recent "March for Jesus" strategy demonstrates.



attitudinal conclusions<sup>63</sup>. Constitutional separation of Church and State and the increasing prevalence of "free churches" do not in themselves guarantee freedom from Constantinianism<sup>64</sup>. Because Christendom is a mindset as well as a historical period or political entity, unless a conscious choice is made for a non-Constantinian hermeneutics (such as Anabaptism offers), Scripture will still be interpreted in a traditional Constantinian way<sup>65</sup>.

The pervasiveness of Constantinian thinking is further evidenced by the emergence of "neo-Constantinianism" in a variety of mutually antagonistic forms. Two Western examples are the carefully argued writings of Lesslie Newbigin on the subject of the Gospel in modern Western culture<sup>66</sup> and the detailed prescriptions for the "reconstruction of Christian civilisation"

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<sup>63</sup>Yoder wrote: "Just as consequentialism (costs and benefits can be quantified and the right action validated by a utility calculus) is a Constantinian reflex in ethics, so is the reproach of separatism a Constantinian reflex in ecclesiology". See Yoder: "Orientation in Midstream: A Response to the Responses", in Schipani, Freedom 163.

<sup>64</sup>See the comments by David L Watson on the situation in the USA in Watson: "Salt to the World: An Ecclesiology of Liberation", in Branson & Padilla, Conflict 118. See also Moltmann, Crucified 323; and Shank: "Anabaptists and Mission", in Shenk, Anabaptism 220.

<sup>65</sup>John Yoder has noted the prevalence among Evangelicals of the Constantinian "just war" interpretation of Scripture as an example of the persistent influence of Constantinian thinking: Yoder: "The Contemporary Evangelical Revival and the Peace Churches", in Ramseyer, Mission 101-2.

<sup>66</sup>See Newbigin, Foolishness; Newbigin, 1984; Newbigin, Lesslie: The Gospel in a Pluralist Society (London: SPCK, 1989). Although Newbigin has denied his suggestions would lead to a new form of Constantinianism, it is difficult to see how they would result in anything very different. On this, see an unpublished and undated paper by Wright, Nigel: "The Newbigin Agenda: Way Forward or Neo-Constantinianism".



issuing from right-wing North American institutes<sup>67</sup>. Lesslie Newbigin has identified the influence of the Enlightenment as crucial in the inability of the Church to penetrate Western society with the gospel. Despite his insistence that his recommendations do not amount to a return to Christendom, his programme does seem to require the adoption of a new form of Constantinianism<sup>68</sup>. Various "reconstructionist" writings have advocated the adoption of Old Testament laws as the basis for Western civilisation and the reconstruction of society along theocratic lines similar to Old Testament Israel. Although a division of function between Church and State is envisaged, the result is a neo-Constantinian synthesis.

A non-Western example of neo-Constantinianism is Latin American liberation theology. Although markedly different from the political convictions of traditional European Christendom, the aims of some liberation theologians

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<sup>67</sup>In particular the Chalcedon Foundation, the Institute for Christian Economics and the Foundation for Christian Self-Government. Influential writers include Rousas J Rushdoony, Greg Bahnsen, Gary North and David Chilton. The Foundation for Christian Reconstruction, founded by Stephen Perks, is the British equivalent.

<sup>68</sup>Nigel Wright, acknowledging Newbigin's insistence that he is not advocating a return to Constantinianism, nevertheless has written: "It may be questioned whether Newbigin is adequately stringent in his perception of Constantinianism". See Wright, "Newbigin" 5. He has noted the way in which Newbigin described the Constantinian shift as a valuable and necessary experiment and appears not to have regarded its negative consequences as of great significance. Interestingly, this criticism is similar to that made by John Yoder of liberation theologians - that an awareness of the Constantinian issue is an inadequate safeguard against the adoption of a neo-Constantinian option. See below at p341.

seem surprisingly close to Constantinianism<sup>69</sup>. Although the kind of ideal society envisaged is very different, there is a similar tendency to identify the kingdom of God with certain social conditions<sup>70</sup>. There is agreement with historic Constantinianism that coercion is sometimes necessary to advance God's kingdom in the world. The distinction between "the Church" and "the world" is consistently blurred<sup>71</sup>. A redefinition of Jesus that seems to bear little resemblance to his presentation in the Gospels, together with a reliance on selected Old Testament passages to undergird principles and programmes and a marginalisation of New Testament

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<sup>69</sup>Willard Swartley concluded: "liberation theology continues to operate within the Constantinian structured vision for society whereas the Anabaptist movement called for a post-Constantinian alternative". See Swartley: "Liberation Theology, Anabaptist Pacifism and Münsterite Violence: Hermeneutical Comparisons and Evaluation", in Scipani, Freedom 70.

<sup>70</sup>Jurgen Moltmann warned: "A church which, seeking for an identity and not preserving its distinctiveness, plunges into a social and political movement, once again becomes the 'religion of society'. It is of course no longer a conservative religion of society, but the progressive religion of what may be a better future society". Moltmann asked, "But can a Christian community or church ever become the 'political religion' of its existing or future society without forgetting the man from Nazareth who was crucified, and losing the identity it has in his cross?" Moltmann, Crucified 17.

<sup>71</sup>LaVerne Rutschman noted that "Liberationists...tend to equate the people of God with the poor - regenerated, apparently through the 'baptism of poverty'. Since God works in the world for their liberation directly and not necessarily through the church, the poor are considered his people". He commented: "This is not unlike the traditional pattern in Latin American society in which all citizens are Christians through infant baptism" (thus Liberation Theology is neo-Constantinian in nature). Rutschman concluded: "For Anabaptism, of course, the people of God are found in the believing community of disciples...In Liberation Theology this believing community is often bypassed". See Rutschman: "Anabaptism" 266.



ethics, all seem to reflect a transmuted Constantinianism<sup>72</sup>.

A recent symposium<sup>73</sup> drew together Latin American liberation theologians, radical Protestants and Mennonites. They recognised many shared concerns and areas of agreement, but the issue of neo-Constantinianism was raised as an area of concern. Referring to an example in early Anabaptist history where an attempt was made to build a radical new Christendom, Willard Swartley warned of the danger of Liberation Theology taking the same course<sup>74</sup>. Three participants - Jose Miguez Bonino, George Pixley and Richard Shaull - argued that this concern was unfounded for varying reasons, but John Yoder challenged these dismissals. He argued: "The respondents are not to blame for thus underestimating the weight of the Constantinian question. It is, after all, not their language. It is the code language of radical reformers at least since Waldo, and designates threats to a Gospel ethos more deep-seated than what our respondents assure us will not happen"<sup>75</sup>. Liberation theologians are both aware of

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<sup>72</sup>This interpretation is supported by a consideration of the influence of Jacques Maritain, author of The New Christendom, on the development of Liberation Theology. On Maritain, see Costas, Orlando: "Response to Watson", in Branson & Padilla, Conflict 141; and Lima, Alceu Amoroso: "Testimony: On the Influence of Maritain in Latin America" New Scholasticism (1972) 46:84.

<sup>73</sup>The papers presented at this discussion are contained in Schipani, Freedom.

<sup>74</sup>Swartley, Willard: "Liberation Theology, Anabaptist Pacifism and Münsterite Violence: Hermeneutical Comparisons and Evaluation", in Schipani, Freedom 70.

<sup>75</sup>Yoder: "Orientation in Midstream: A Response to the Responders", in Schipani, Freedom 163.



Constantinianism and convinced that they are not neo-Constantinian<sup>76</sup>, but those informed by Anabaptist perspectives question whether they are defining Constantinianism correctly or aware of its ability to reappear in transmuted forms. Once again Constantinianism as a mindset or reflex, rather than one historical expression of this, is the real issue.

A significant contribution of Anabaptism, then, is its development of a hermeneutics that is largely devoid of Constantinian assumptions and conclusions in biblical interpretation. Although contemporary expressions of the Constantinian mindset may differ from its sixteenth century manifestation, its essence is unchanged. The testimony of the Anabaptists is that establishment Christianity based on Constantinian thinking cannot interpret Scripture reliably because of fundamental discrepancies between biblical and Constantinian worldviews. Millard Lind has argued, "Given its original context, does not the interpretation of Scripture need to come out of the traditions of radically disestablished Christianity ? Will we not find greater sensitivity to the biblical message in those whose social context and personal commitments are closer to that of Jesus ? Will not the radical theo-political vision of the Bible be twisted if we rely entirely for our interpretations on state-oriented theologians ?...what

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<sup>76</sup>Miguez Bonino, for example, has identified the fifth century as the period when the 'hermeneutics of order' supplanted the preferable 'hermeneutics of justice' and has argued that "the question of the Constantinian church has to be turned completely around": Bonino, Toward 82-4. See also the extended discussion of Constantinianism in Sobrino, Christology 294-8.

we really need is a new breed of disestablishment interpreters"<sup>77</sup>.

Anabaptist hermeneutics is an expression of biblical interpretation from within this "radically disestablished Christianity". Its contribution to contemporary hermeneutics is to draw attention to Constantinianism as a presuppositional issue and to provide examples, through a comparison of its hermeneutics with those of the Reformers and their heirs, of an alternative non-Constantinian approach to Scripture and the results of such an approach. The articulation of a contemporary non-Constantinian hermeneutics is essential, both for those who have welcomed the Church's emergence from Christendom, and for those who are still tempted to yearn for its re-establishment in one form or other. To such a hermeneutics

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<sup>77</sup>Lind, Monotheism 11-12. But this must not be pushed too far. The issue of Constantinianism is not the only issue to be considered in hermeneutics. Establishment theologians with a heart for the poor have often reached similar conclusions to the Anabaptists without renouncing their Constantinian context.



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<sup>78</sup>Although the development of a contemporary non-Constantinian hermeneutics would be enhanced by a consideration of other factors that were either beyond the scope of the Anabaptists or dealt with inadequately by them. Two of these factors are beyond the scope of this study but are topics worthy of further investigation. The third will be considered below.

First, the Anabaptists' ignorance and dismissal of earlier interpreters is understandable given their suspicion of Constantinian bias, in the case of those writing between the fourth and sixteenth centuries, but their similar treatment of pre-Constantinian interpreters was both unnecessary and unfortunate. In part this was no doubt due to the limited availability in the sixteenth century of patristic writings, and in part also to the absence from their ranks of scholars able to utilise these. An analysis of pre-Constantinian methods of interpretation and exegetical conclusions would be helpful in testing the thesis proposed here. If Anabaptist suspicions about the influence of Constantinianism on biblical interpretation were correct, it should be possible to discover substantial agreement between Anabaptist hermeneutics and the hermeneutics of interpreters in the first three centuries. If such a correlation is found, and there is reason to believe it exists, considerable support will be given thereby to the Anabaptists' position. If it does not exist, a reassessment of the significance of the Constantinian factor will be required.

Second, Anabaptism was but one of several movements which rejected the Constantinian synthesis. Although detailed analysis of the hermeneutics of these movements is rarely possible because of the paucity of surviving records, there are indications that on many issues they reached similar conclusions to the Anabaptists. The Lollards' focus on the New Testament and reliance on the Holy Spirit as interpreter, the Christocentrism and opposition to Constantinian misuse of the Old Testament of Petr Chelcicky, the emphasis on the clarity of Scripture of the Waldenses and early Dutch sacramentarians, and the focus on application of the English separatist, Henry Hart, are examples of such parallels. It is arguable that Anabaptist hermeneutics represents the testimony of many other marginalised groups, and that there is a non-Constantinian hermeneutic tradition that is broader and longer than that embodied in sixteenth century Anabaptism alone. On these other radical groups see particularly: Peters, Edward: Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe (London: Scolar Press, 1980); Hudson, Anne: Selections from English Wycliffite Writings (Cambridge: CUP, 1978); Wagner, Murray: Petr Chelcicky (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983); Horst, Radical.



Third, despite the validity of the Anabaptists' protest against the illegitimate use of the Old Testament, they did not develop a persuasive way of interpreting this. There are some significant implications in their approach which might be developed further, but these do not provide a sufficient basis for an adequate hermeneutic of the Old Testament. Although the issues of Old Testament interpretation and Constantinianism are separate, they often overlap. The development of a non-Constantinian hermeneutic does not guarantee a satisfactory handling of the Old Testament. But it is arguable that such a hermeneutic provides a necessary framework for the proper interpretation of the Old Testament. This issue will be explored further below at pp444ff.

### C. Anabaptism and Latin American Hermeneutics

The numerical growth of Christianity in the Third World and the increasing articulation of theological and hermeneutical insights by non-European scholars are challenging the dominance of European hermeneutical perspectives and methodologies. It might be assumed that Anabaptist hermeneutics, as a European methodology, albeit a neglected minority position, would have neither significant parallels with these developments nor insights to offer. However, not only are there several important parallels, but significant interaction has already taken place in this area, with Anabaptist hermeneutics both being drawn on as a source of inspiration and critiqued as a different but relevant approach on certain important issues. The intention here is both to examine the interaction that has already occurred and to explore further issues relevant to the development of Third World hermeneutics on which Anabaptist hermeneutical perspectives have a contribution to make.

The choice of two Latin American expressions of Third World hermeneutics - Liberation Theology and Radical Discipleship<sup>1</sup> - as the foci of this study is based on four considerations: the fact that Latin American theologians have taken a lead in this area, providing a substantial amount of material for analysis and comparison with Anabaptist sources; the evidence of several obvious parallels (but also some significant differences) between the approaches to Scripture of those regarded as dangerous revolutionaries in the sixteenth century and those accused of similar tendencies in the

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<sup>1</sup>It is beyond the scope of this study to examine the history and practice of either of these movements, except insofar as these assist in understanding their hermeneutics.

late twentieth century; the existence of two distinct Latin American movements with common social backgrounds and shared convictions on various issues but with marked hermeneutical differences, enabling an informative three-way comparison to be made with Anabaptist hermeneutics; and the significance of the interaction between these movements and Anabaptist sources that has already taken place.

### (1) Anabaptism and Latin American Liberation Theology<sup>2</sup>

There are two main sources for studying "liberation hermeneutics" (as the interpretive principles and practices of liberation theology are sometimes designated): the writings of theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Clodovis and Leonardo Boff, José Miguez Bonino, Juan Luis Segundo and Jon Sobrino; and the interpretive practice of Latin American "base ecclesial communities", as described by various writers. To understand Anabaptist hermeneutics it was important to consider not only the writings of recognised leaders but also the practice of Anabaptist congregations. Similarly, to appreciate liberation hermeneutics the practices of the base communities<sup>3</sup> need to be considered as well as the writings of liberation

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<sup>2</sup>Although Latin American liberation theology will be the primary focus here, similar issues arise with other forms of liberation theology. Most of these have had little or no interaction with Anabaptist perspectives, one exception to this being feminist hermeneutics, on which see Harder, Lydia: "Hermeneutic Community - A Feminist Challenge", in Koontz, Perspectives 46-8; and Harder, Lydia: "Discipleship Reexamined: Women in the Hermeneutical Community", in Huebner, Church 203.

<sup>3</sup>No assumption is being made here that the base communities are exactly equivalent to Anabaptist congregations - indeed some important differences will be examined in this section - but there is certainly some parallelism at least in terms of the type of source material required to evaluate hermeneutical practice.



theologians. From these scholarly and communal sources, areas of agreement between Anabaptist and liberation hermeneutics can be discovered<sup>4</sup>.

First, both movements have enfranchised ordinary, uneducated believers and opposed the monopoly of professional interpreters. This was one of the most significant achievements of Anabaptism at a time when one set of authoritative interpreters was being replaced with another<sup>5</sup>. To understand liberation theology as simply replacing European scholarly hermeneutics with Latin American scholarly hermeneutics fails to do justice to the role accorded to the base communities in biblical interpretation.

Carlos Mesters, describing Brazilian base communities, wrote: "Interpreting the Bible ceased to be thought of as the transmission of information exclusively by the exegete who has studied for the purpose but a community activity to which all should contribute"<sup>6</sup>. Liberation theologians have spoken frequently of the "hermeneutical privilege of the poor" and have encouraged powerless Christians to read, discuss, interpret and apply

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<sup>4</sup>Some of these emerged in the symposium referred to above, the papers from which are contained in Schipani, Freedom.

<sup>5</sup>See above at p95.

<sup>6</sup>Mesters, Carlos: "Listening to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches. Popular Interpretation of the Bible in Brazil" *Concilium* 1991/1 102.

Scripture<sup>7</sup>. They have expressed the conviction that poor and uneducated people can "discover meanings which can so easily elude the technically better equipped exegete"<sup>8</sup>. Whether "the poor" in liberation hermeneutics are equivalent to "ordinary Christians" in Anabaptist hermeneutics will be examined below, but the rejection of a scholarly monopoly over biblical interpretation and the hermeneutical enfranchisement of ordinary people is common to both movements<sup>9</sup>.

Second, in both movements hermeneutics is regarded as a communal activity,

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<sup>7</sup>Gutierrez wrote: "We too are his [God's] people. That is why it is so easy to grasp the meaning of the Bible...And yet we tend to approach the Bible with a certain sense of insecurity. We feel out of our element. We are on unfamiliar ground. We are afraid of not knowing what we are talking about. We have the idea that serious Bible reading demands historical, philological, theological, and geographical knowledge that most of us do not have. So we look to the specialists, the exegetes, and we depend on their 'scientific interpretation of the text' to tell us what the Bible means": Gutierrez, Power 3-4. Gutierrez did not reject such scientific interpretation, but he felt it had been exaggerated and had disenfranchised the poor and uneducated. His emphasis on the clarity of Scripture and the importance of freedom from dependence on experts sounds very similar to Anabaptist statements.

<sup>8</sup>Rowland & Corner, Liberating 39.

<sup>9</sup>Richard Shaull has suggested that the base communities are reviving within a Catholic context the emphasis of the Protestant Reformers on placing the Bible in the hands of ordinary people, but that they are putting into practice the idea of the priesthood of all believers in a way that Protestants have never achieved. He wrote: "We Protestants gave the Bible to the people and then too often proceeded to tell them what it said. The basic Christian communities function on the assumption that the Holy Spirit will lead the poor to understand the Word as they share their insights with each other": Shaull, Richard: Heralds of a New Reformation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984) 123. Although Shaull made no comparison with Anabaptism, his statement could be applied equally to sixteenth century Anabaptist congregations. Both Anabaptist and liberation hermeneutics have taken an emphasis of the Reformation and pursued it further than the Reformers were themselves prepared to.



with a local community functioning as the hermeneutic community. In Anabaptism, congregations of baptised believers comprised this hermeneutic community. In Latin America, base communities have operated in this way. Liberation theologians and Anabaptist leaders alike have expressed their convictions that their own ideas and interpretations have both been influenced by and are to be tested within these hermeneutic communities<sup>10</sup>. José Miguez Bonino declared: "A Christian hermeneutics is unthinkable as a purely individual undertaking. It necessarily presupposes a 'hermeneutical community'"<sup>11</sup>.

The "base churches" of Latin America have gathered thousands of Christians in small groups around the Bible to reflect on its significance for their lives and communities<sup>12</sup>. The existence of small groups studying the Bible together is, of course, common in many traditions, but usually these have little hermeneutical significance beyond the groups themselves. What is distinctive about Anabaptism and liberation theology is the recognition of the local groups as hermeneutic communities and a symbiotic relationship between these groups and the leaders or spokespersons of the movements. Willard Swartley has recognised this communal hermeneutic approach to Scripture in both Anabaptism and liberation theology as a significant area of agreement between the movements<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup>For Anabaptist statements to this effect see above at pp242-4.

<sup>11</sup>Bonino, José Miguez: Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) 154.

<sup>12</sup>Mesters, "Listening" 102-4.

<sup>13</sup>Swartley: "Liberation Theology, Anabaptist Pacifism and Munsterite Violence: Hermeneutical Comparisons and Evaluation", in Schipani, Freedom 73-4.



Third, the emphasis within both movements has been on application rather than intellectual interpretation<sup>14</sup>. Willard Swartley has written: "In both of these approaches to Scripture, Anabaptist and liberationist, a strong relationship exists between action-commitment on the part of the community and the study of the biblical text"<sup>15</sup>. Liberation theologians have adopted the Marxist term praxis and applied it to biblical interpretation, opposing the notion of academic detachment in hermeneutics<sup>16</sup>. Andrew Kirk has defined liberation hermeneutics as "critical reflection on historical documents in the light of present reality"<sup>17</sup>. The contemporary application of biblical texts is the main issue rather than an understanding of the texts themselves and their original contexts. And Carlos Mesters has summarised the change of focus in the base churches: "The aim of interpretation is no longer to interpret the Bible, but to interpret life with the help of the Bible"<sup>18</sup>.

Charles Elliott commented on another feature of liberation hermeneutics that demonstrates concurrence with Anabaptist convictions - the testing of

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<sup>14</sup>"It is a hermeneutics that favours application rather than explanation": Boff, Leonardo & Boff, Clodovis: Introducing Liberation Theology (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1987) 33.

<sup>15</sup>Swartley: "Liberation Theology, Anabaptist Pacifism and Münsterite Violence: Hermeneutical Comparisons and Evaluation", in Schipani, Freedom 69.

<sup>16</sup>Kirk, J Andrew: Liberation Theology (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979) 35, 62.

<sup>17</sup>Kirk, Liberation 53.

<sup>18</sup>Mesters, "Listening" 103. Dan Cohn-Sherbok concurred: "This reading of the Bible from the basis of the poor favours application rather than explanation. Liberation hermeneutics reads scripture as a book of life. Textual meaning is sought only as practical reading; actualization of the divine word is paramount": Cohn-Sherbok: "Liberation Theology", in Coggins & Houlden, Dictionary 397.

interpretations by their ethical consequences. "Fundamentalist Protestants still say 'It's fine. The Bible will tell you whether it's true or not'... The liberation theologians will say very simply 'the test for truth is the effect it has on people's lives. Is this proposition...actually liberating or enslaving them ?'"<sup>19</sup> One aspect of the task of the hermeneutic community in both movements has been to reflect on the consequences of suggested interpretations and to contrast these with the liberating message at the heart of Scripture. Application is both the goal of interpretation and a means of testing proposed interpretations. Separation between interpretation and application is regarded as illegitimate, and the prioritising of the former over the latter is avoided in favour of an ongoing partnership of action and reflection.

Fourth, both movements have operated with a "hermeneutics of justice" rather than a "hermeneutics of order". The Anabaptists were unimpressed by the Reformers' proposals that Scripture should be interpreted in ways that did not threaten social order and stability. Their primary concern was to obey Scripture regardless of the social consequences. If changes were necessary, such changes would be beneficial if they were in line with Scripture. Similarly, liberation theology has been interested in social justice rather than social stability and has approached Scripture in the light of this interest. Indeed, far from looking for ways to interpret Scripture that will not threaten the social order, liberation hermeneutics is suspicious of ways in which Scripture has been misinterpreted in the past in order to ensure its conformity with the status quo. It generally

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<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Rowland & Corner, Liberating 42.



presupposes<sup>20</sup> the oppressive nature of that order and anticipates that Scripture will call for radical changes<sup>21</sup>. Although liberation theology and Anabaptism may not agree on the exact shape of a just society nor on the means of achieving this<sup>22</sup>, they certainly agree that biblical interpretation must not be subjected to the control of vested social interests<sup>23</sup>.

Fifth, both movements have been drawn to the Gospels and to the historical Jesus<sup>24</sup>. Although liberation hermeneutics cannot be regarded as Christocentric in the way Anabaptist hermeneutics was, in that it has drawn its inspiration and primary paradigms from the Exodus story and other Old

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<sup>20</sup>It is arguable that this presupposition itself distorts the liberationist approach to Scripture just as much as those operating with a "hermeneutics of order". The influence of presuppositions on liberation hermeneutics will be considered below at pp356-7.

<sup>21</sup>José Miguez Bonino may have had Anabaptism in mind when he wrote: "Although we must admit that this tradition of 'order' has been dominant in the history of the church since at least the fifth century, it is also necessary to emphasize that there has at the same time always been another tradition as well, sometimes very small and even marginal to the ecclesiastical structure, one that has interpreted the Bible in another direction - as a call to radical transformation inspired by the prophetic-messianic focus on the justice and peace of the kingdom of God": Bonino, Toward 84.

<sup>22</sup>See above at pp341-2.

<sup>23</sup>Severino Croatto expressed the concern of many liberation theologians that the Bible has been "so long 'possessed', controlled, explained, interpreted, only by representatives of a dominant stratum of society (church hierarchy, professional theologians and exegetes, the educated)". See Croatto, J Severino: Biblical Hermeneutics (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987) 63.

<sup>24</sup>Rowland & Corner, Liberating 51-2. They wrote that liberation theologians have "recalled us to the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels as a crucial hermeneutical key in understanding the heart of the response of Christian discipleship". See also Boff & Boff, Introducing 35.



Testament themes and passages, Jesus as the friend of the poor and the prophetic critic of an oppressive establishment has been influential in liberation hermeneutics<sup>25</sup>. Leonardo Boff, for example, has urged the rediscovery of "the historical Jesus who was poor, weak, powerless, critical of the social and religious status quo of his time", but whose portrayal has been "enshrined and spiritualized by the institution and so divested of its critical power"<sup>26</sup>.

The picture of Jesus that emerges from the two movements is by no means identical<sup>27</sup>, nor is liberation theology as Jesus-centred as Anabaptism. But liberation theology shares with Anabaptism an attraction to the humanity of Jesus and a dissatisfaction with the perceived overemphasis in Catholic and Protestant circles on the divinity of Christ at the expense of his humanity, on the Epistles at the expense of the Gospels, and on Christological and soteriological doctrinal statements at the expense of seeing Jesus as the model for discipleship<sup>28</sup>.

These parallels between Anabaptist and liberation hermeneutics are quite extensive and important enough to suggest that Anabaptist hermeneutics might have contemporary significance in its provision of historical precedents for many central features of liberation hermeneutics. For those whose sympathies lie with the Anabaptist approach (an increasing number according to evidence presented in an earlier section<sup>29</sup>), a comparative

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<sup>25</sup>Gutierrez, Power 4, 15, 61.

<sup>26</sup>Boff, Church 59.

<sup>27</sup>This will be explored further below at p362.

<sup>28</sup>Richard Shaull has written: "Latin American theologians are giving central importance to the person of Jesus: how he lived, what he said, what he did". See Shaull, Heralds 40.

<sup>29</sup>See above at pp13-19.

study of Anabaptist and liberation hermeneutics might be helpful in both interpreting liberationist thinking and appreciating its hermeneutical contributions. Those who are tempted to dismiss Latin American liberation hermeneutics as relevant only in its specific context will find this charge less easy to substantiate in the light of the very similar Anabaptist convictions that developed in a quite different sociological and historical setting.

However, there are also several issues on which Anabaptist and liberation hermeneutics differ. Although the perspective of liberation hermeneutics on some of these issues may be an advance on the Anabaptist position, offering a more sophisticated methodology or indicating approaches to biblical themes that the Anabaptists undervalued, on others Anabaptist hermeneutics appears to have further contemporary significance in offering perspectives which may help to refine or develop liberation hermeneutics. One example of this, considered above<sup>30</sup>, was the identification of neo-Constantinian tendencies in liberation hermeneutics. Here other examples should be considered.

First, the relationship between the scholars and the local communities, mentioned above, should be explored further. Most liberation theologians are highly educated, many of them having studied in European institutions. They have perceived their role as both serving the local communities and articulating liberationist perspectives to the wider Church. As exegetes and scholars, they can provide base communities with background information about biblical history and culture, and with socio-political analysis

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<sup>30</sup>See above at pp339ff.

of the contemporary culture. Coupled with their determination to honour the "hermeneutical privilege of the poor", this appears to offer to the base communities a resource that most Anabaptist communities lacked - scholarly expertise<sup>31</sup> that did not disenfranchise ordinary people.

However, questions may be raised concerning the influence of such scholars and the degree to which they prejudice the genuine enfranchisement of local communities by imposing, albeit unwittingly, a particular socio-political ideology that colours all interpretations. Some sympathetic observers have concluded this influence is minimal<sup>32</sup>, and liberationist writers have accused those who have questioned their ideological bias and the imposing of this on the base communities of failing to discern their own biases. They have challenged the supposedly objective hermeneutics of

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<sup>31</sup>Gutierrez described such a resource person as an "organic intellectual", "a thinker with organic links to the popular liberation undertaking": Gutierrez, Power 103. See also Mesters, "Listening" 102.

<sup>32</sup>For example, Rowland & Corner, Liberating 39.



European scholars<sup>33</sup> and been wary of accepting their criticisms<sup>34</sup>. But, however valid these criticisms of European scholars, questions about such influence remain. The fact that their critics may be biased does not guarantee that they themselves are free from bias.

Interestingly, similar issues are also raised by other expressions of liberation theology. Itumeleng Mosala, for example, has written: "Latin American liberation theology...presupposes European history and culture and not the indigenous Latin American history and culture; thus blacks and Indians are missing from the Latin American theology of liberation"<sup>35</sup>. The influence of European thinkers and theological training on liberation theologians has been profound, despite their seeming hostility to this tradition. Indeed, even the "ideological suspicion" used by liberationists

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<sup>33</sup>Vinay Samuel and Christopher Sudgen wrote: "Churches among the poor nations in the Third World...are asking whether the previously dominant theology was as objective, neutral and universal as its proponents maintained": Samuel & Sudgen: Evangelism and the Poor (Bangalore: Partnership in Mission Asia, 1982) 22-3. See also Sheppard, Gerald: "An Overview of the Hermeneutical Situation of Biblical and Theological Studies in the United States", in Branson & Padilla, Conflict 15; and Croatto, Biblical 80.

<sup>34</sup>The reasons for this debate being rather unproductive and defensive are explored by David Watson in "Salt to the World: An Ecclesiology of Liberation" in Branson & Padilla, Conflict 116. David Scholer has sympathised with the wariness of liberation theologians on this point: "A common critique that the dominant [European] group has made against so-called 'liberation theologies'...is that they reflect only one particular perspective and ought to be more 'objective'. Perhaps this critique is true enough in some cases, but...their use of the Bible and biblical interpretation should make the dominant group aware, even painfully aware, that it, too, reflects only one particular perspective": Scholer, "Issues" 11.

<sup>35</sup>Mosala, Itumeleng: Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 3.

to challenge European hermeneutics was itself adopted from the European Jurgen Habermas<sup>36</sup>.

The experience of Anabaptists in the sixteenth century provides an interesting parallel to this situation. They heard Protestant theologians speak scathingly of Catholic hermeneutics and urging the liberation of biblical interpretation from the tyranny of pope and councils, just as liberation theologians now call for Scripture to be liberated from the straightjacket of European hermeneutics. But the Protestant solution seemed both to be little different from the system they were opposing and to owe more than the Reformers were willing to acknowledge to methods developed within Catholic Christendom over the past several centuries. Similarly, Latin American liberation theology remains predominantly a scholarly and European phenomenon, despite all its pretensions to being a popular movement. Women and Indians continue to be marginalised at the expense of Europeans. The very poor in Latin America are to be found primarily in fundamentalist Pentecostal churches, rather than in base communities. The main impact of liberation theology has been on European scholars, rather than in Latin America itself.

These criticisms do not deprive liberation hermeneutics of its validity or significance, but they do suggest that the role of scholars has been much greater than is commonly admitted, and that ideological presuppositions have been very influential. Such presuppositions may be very different from establishment ones, but they are not presuppositions that arose spontaneously from within the base communities. By comparison, Anabaptist hermeneutics, although dependent in part on educated first-generation

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<sup>36</sup>See Rowland & Corner, Liberating 75.



leaders, was much more representative of the ways in which ordinary congregations interpreted Scripture.

In addition to providing an informative critique of a parallel situation in the sixteenth century, Anabaptist hermeneutics points to the continuing need for a genuine enfranchisement of ordinary believers and for an "ideological suspicion" of grids imposed on Scripture from whatever political or sociological perspective. Perhaps liberation theologians will be able more readily to appreciate such concerns when articulated on the basis of comparisons with a marginalised movement of poor Christians, such as Anabaptism, than when similar issues are raised by representatives of the dominant European scholarly community. Another possibility is that an exploration of ways in which scholars could function within an Anabaptist-style hermeneutic community, but not exercise ideological control, might result from interaction between Anabaptist and liberationist hermeneutical perspectives<sup>37</sup>.

Second, although the local community functions hermeneutically in both movements, there is a significant difference in the nature of these communities. Among Anabaptists, Scripture was interpreted by "believers' churches", where everyone had expressed a commitment to Jesus Christ and been baptised as believers. The focus of biblical interpretation was ecclesiocentric and oriented towards discipleship and mission. Scripture was read in order to discover how the congregation should worship, witness and act towards each other and "the world". But this distinction between "the Church" and "the world" is nothing like as clear in liberation

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<sup>37</sup>On this, see below at p435.



hermeneutics. Indeed, the idea that the Church is called to be in any way separate from society is discouraged. In the continuous struggle to hold in tension the New Testament descriptions of the Church as "in the world" but "not of the world", Anabaptists exemplify those who have emphasised the latter, liberationists those who have emphasised the former. The Latin American base communities have emerged, as did Anabaptist congregations, from a society where infant baptism indicated entrance into Christendom. But, unlike the Anabaptist congregations, they have not repudiated this concept of a sacral society. The base communities are not "believers' churches". The shared commitment of Anabaptists and liberation theologians to communal hermeneutics must not disguise the very different kinds of communities involved.

It seems that liberation theology's belief in the "hermeneutical privilege of the poor" implies that poverty and oppression in themselves equip base communities in the interpretation of Scripture, whatever the spiritual experience of the interpreters<sup>38</sup>. Among Anabaptists, regeneration and the activity of the Holy Spirit were regarded as primary<sup>39</sup>. Membership of a community committed to discipleship and personal experience of the Holy Spirit were prerequisites. Although the experience of suffering and powerlessness was significant, according to the Anabaptist leaders, it was persecution for following Christ, suffering in relation to discipleship,

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<sup>38</sup>Although some observers of base communities do emphasise the spiritual context of their interpretive activities, so this distinction should not be overdrawn. See, for example, Mesters, "Listening" 104.

<sup>39</sup>Whereas among liberationists, "identification with the underprivileged becomes the first step in understanding the Christian Scripture": Sugirtharajah, R S: Voices from the Margin (London: SPCK, 1991) 437.

rather than political oppression, that was in view. This was seen as equipping interpreters with an advantageous perspective and link with the New Testament *sitz im leben*<sup>40</sup>. They did not suggest that oppression, injustice, poverty or other kinds of suffering were *per se* hermeneutically significant<sup>41</sup>. From the perspective of Anabaptist hermeneutics, therefore, liberation hermeneutics appears to give inadequate attention to the spiritual dimensions of the hermeneutic community and to overemphasise its sociological dimensions.

Liberation hermeneutics attempts to apply biblical teaching to the whole of society and to local communities as a whole, without making clear distinctions between "Church" and "world". This has resulted in certain biblical themes being explored that meant little to the Anabaptists, themes such as liberation, social justice and the Jubilee, and some biblical passages being found to be relevant to which the Anabaptists paid scant attention. Engagement with these themes and exploration of these passages has provided liberation theologians with insights into Scripture that Anabaptism lacked.

There seems no reason, however, why the same themes and passages cannot be explored within a framework which accords hermeneutical significance to the distinction between "Church" and "world". It is not the blurring of

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<sup>40</sup>According to R S Sugirtharajah, however, it is "solidarity... with people and their oppression" that "makes the historical distance between the text and the context less conspicuous": Sugirtharajah, *Voices* 436. Anabaptists did not discount the social factors, but they regarded their communities of disciples as the primary link with the New Testament.

<sup>41</sup>For further examination of the issue of persecution, see below at pp430-1.



the distinction between "Church" and "world" that is determinative<sup>42</sup>, but the readiness of Christians to engage fully, in hermeneutics and all aspects of discipleship, with social issues. Millard Lind has written appreciatively of liberation theology's engagement with society, but he has expressed concern about its treatment of church and society. "Have these Latin American theologians really gotten hold of the biblical message?" he asked. "The message of Scripture may indeed be justice. But is it not always a justice rooted in the structures of discipleship?"<sup>43</sup> The society-wide scope of liberation hermeneutics needs to be combined with the ecclesiological focus of Anabaptist hermeneutics<sup>44</sup>.

Third, the Christocentrism of Anabaptist hermeneutics presents to liberation hermeneutics the challenge of allowing its interest in the Jesus of the Gospels to be more determinative of its interpretation of the whole of Scripture and of its priorities. In particular, the frequent objections raised by Anabaptists to the Reformers' practice of mining the Old Testament for passages to endorse actions and programmes for which little New Testament support can be found are equally relevant to liberation

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<sup>42</sup>Indeed, it is arguable that this blurring has resulted in a narrowing of perspective within liberation theology as well as a broadening, of which the virtual restriction of the "kingdom of God" to the socio-political dimension is an example. As Andrew Kirk has commented, "The hermeneutical practice of the theology of liberation, far from releasing the texts' 'reserve of meaning', may obscure some of its riches, because of a too narrow praxiological vantage point": Kirk, Liberation 151.

<sup>43</sup>Lind, Monotheism 9.

<sup>44</sup>Willard Swartley, acknowledging the challenge presented to the Anabaptist tradition by liberation hermeneutics, nevertheless insisted that this tradition "would need to criticize liberation theology - especially in the area of ecclesiology": EBI 328.



hermeneutics<sup>45</sup>. A further parallel can be drawn between the Anabaptists' criticism of the Reformers for their tendency to marginalise certain elements in Jesus' teaching, such as nonviolence and enemy-loving and the same tendency in liberation hermeneutics<sup>46</sup>.

A final area of difference between Anabaptism and liberation theology concerns the principle of *sola scriptura*. Anabaptist hermeneutics were rooted in the Reformation commitment to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. Since this commitment is shared by evangelical interpreters, any Anabaptist critique of liberation hermeneutics on this point will not be unique, but as on some other issues<sup>47</sup>, the common ground between Anabaptism and liberation theology may enable liberation theologians to receive more readily Anabaptist criticisms of the erosion of biblical authority that seems to characterise liberation hermeneutics. For their commitment to *sola scriptura* did not prevent Anabaptists from recognising in the Reformers a tendency to equate their own doctrinal and social convictions with biblical teaching and thus undercut their scriptural principle, a tendency which many Third World theologians suspect still

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<sup>45</sup>On the Anabaptists' critique of the Reformers' use of the Old Testament, see above at pp144-9. Severino Croatto has strongly defended the use of the Old Testament in liberation hermeneutics, but he does not seem to have addressed directly the kind of concerns raised here. See Croatto, Biblical 81-2. For further consideration of Old Testament hermeneutics, see below at pp444ff.

<sup>46</sup>See Swartley: "Liberation Theology, Anabaptist Pacifism and Münsterite Violence: Hermeneutical Comparisons and Evaluation", in Schipani, Freedom 66-7. Although Anabaptist hermeneutics is vulnerable also to the liberationists' criticisms of those who adopt a "false hermeneutic of the Gospels which presents Jesus' ministry in individualistic, internal, apocalyptic and apolitical terms": Kirk, Liberation 129. Swartley concluded that both readings of Scripture were selective.

<sup>47</sup>See above at p359.

characterises European hermeneutics. From the perspective of Anabaptist hermeneutics' radical commitment to sola scriptura and refusal to allow extra-biblical factors to diminish this principle, there is as much danger of Scripture being subservient to the ideological precommitments of liberation theology as there was of it being subservient to the Reformers' doctrinal emphases.

From the perspective of Anabaptist hermeneutics, the question needs to be asked: does liberation hermeneutics treat Scripture as authoritative or is its use of Scripture eclectic?<sup>48</sup> Does Scripture act as the primary source of revelation and arbiter of liberationist ideas and practices, or is it consulted merely to discover stories and texts that are illustrative of principles derived from ideological or situational sources? Pablo Richard<sup>49</sup> has described liberation hermeneutics as a "hermeneutic of inversion" and has commented that this provides "a theology with an unexpected vitality". However, his explanation of this process - "one already had the interpretation of the text through experience, before beginning to read it" - seems to introduce a subjective and situational element that is difficult to square with the normative authority of

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<sup>48</sup>Of concern would be assertions by some liberationists that certain passages of Scripture are intrinsically oppressive, rather than capable of being misused to oppress. See Wood, Hermeneutic 5.

<sup>49</sup>Richard, Pablo: Death of Christendoms, Birth of the Church (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987) 143.



The contemporary significance of Anabaptist hermeneutics for liberation theology, then, is threefold. First, it endorses several important aspects of liberation hermeneutics through its testimony that these aspects are not related solely to the context in which liberation theology has developed, but have parallels in a quite different historical context. Second, it provides a helpful basis for a critical analysis of some aspects of liberation hermeneutics that need to be addressed by liberation theologians. Although some of these issues might be raised by European scholars, the shared perspectives of Anabaptism and liberation theology might encourage liberation theologians to consider these issues more sympathetically than if raised by those whose presuppositions are less congenial. Third, the rehabilitation of Anabaptist hermeneutics, for which this study argues, may provide a lens through which European interpreters could look with greater understanding and appreciation at liberation hermeneutics, since similar hermeneutical perspectives were present (though marginalised) at a formative stage in the development of European hermeneutics.

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<sup>50</sup>Rene Padilla has referred rather to liberation hermeneutics as involving a "hermeneutical circulation" between two "texts", history and Scripture, in "dynamic interplay". This concept might help to safeguard the authority of Scripture, but in practice liberation hermeneutics does seem to treat non-biblical factors as authoritative in a way that usurps the authority of Scripture. See Padilla, C Rene: "Liberation Theology: An Appraisal", in Schipani, Freedom 36. See also Stephen Knapp's discussion of Gutierrez' use of Scripture in Amerding, Evangelicals 21ff.



## (2) Anabaptism and Radical Discipleship

Liberation theology and Pentecostalism are two significant expressions of Christianity in Latin America. A third, often described as Radical Discipleship, is associated with the Latin American Theological Fraternity and the names of, among others, Samuel Escobar, Rene Padilla, Orlando Costas and Emilio Nunez. The presentation of papers by Padilla and Escobar at the Lausanne Congress in 1974 marked its emergence as a movement<sup>1</sup>. The choice of this movement for consideration in this section is based on four factors: its emergence from the same sociological situation as liberation theology but development of a hermeneutics that has some parallels with but also several significant differences from liberation hermeneutics; the evidence of considerable reflection on hermeneutical issues within the movement, enabling comparative study with Anabaptist hermeneutics; the acknowledgement of the influence within the movement of Anabaptist perspectives on various issues; and the existence of largely unrecognised parallels between Anabaptist hermeneutics and the hermeneutics of radical discipleship.

Although some of its thinkers and popularisers are African, Asian, North American or European, radical discipleship developed primarily in the same

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<sup>1</sup>Although the Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern in 1973 (following some earlier calls for a new evangelical commitment to social action) was also formative: for this, see Sider, Chicago 12ff. For a brief summary of the emergence of radical discipleship at Lausanne, and its development since, see Escobar, Samuel: "A Movement Divided" in *Transformation* (Vol 8 No 4) 7-13. *Transformation* has been an important conveyer of radical discipleship ideas for several years. See also Sugden, Radical 15ff.

Latin American socio-political environment as liberation theology<sup>2</sup>. It is sympathetic towards it<sup>3</sup>, and it shares several of its perspectives - in particular its concern to address economic and political issues, its commitment to the poor, and its suspicion of ideological presuppositions in the dominant European hermeneutical tradition<sup>4</sup>.

But there are important differences also. Radical discipleship is Protestant<sup>5</sup> rather than Catholic and is committed to an evangelical understanding of both mission and evangelism. Although it has criticised evangelicals for ignoring social dimensions of the gospel and has urged the adoption of a more holistic definition of mission<sup>6</sup>, it has not subsumed evangelism under social involvement in the way that liberation theology has done. This has hermeneutical implications relating to the issue of "Church" and "world" being kept distinct in biblical interpretation. There are other

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<sup>2</sup>According to Chris Sugden, "Radical Discipleship has arisen as Bible-believing Christians have been confronted with situations of injustice, powerlessness and deprivation": Sugden, Radical 145.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Nunez, Emilio: "The Church in the Liberation Theology of Gutierrez: Description and Hermeneutical Analysis", in Carson, Biblical 191. Nunez acknowledged the influence of liberation theology in the development of radical discipleship and summarised its challenges to the Church. For a sympathetic North American treatment, see Pinnock, Clark: "An Evangelical Theology of Human Liberation" Sojourners (Feb 1976) 30. Representatives of radical discipleship were also present at the symposium involving Anabaptists and liberation theologians referred to above and reported by Schipani, Daniel Freedom, and expressed appreciation of the insights of liberation theology. See, for example, Padilla, C Rene: "Liberation Theology: An Appraisal", in Schipani, Freedom 39-40.

<sup>4</sup>See Watson, David L: "Salt to the World: An Ecclesiology of Liberation", in Branson & Padilla, Conflict 114-5.

<sup>5</sup>Sugden, Radical 143, 146.

<sup>6</sup>This was the main burden of the papers presented to the Lausanne Congress in 1974.



differences also which have hermeneutical significance. Its acceptance of the Reformed/Anabaptist position on *sola scriptura* differs from the more selective and situational approach of liberation theology<sup>7</sup>. It is essentially a theological perspective with relatively little popular support. And it has a more global constituency, welcoming the insights of many theologians and missiologists in various parts of the world<sup>8</sup>.

The relationship between radical discipleship and sixteenth century Anabaptism has been freely acknowledged within the movement. Anabaptist perspectives have been mediated particularly by John Howard Yoder, a Mennonite theologian with extensive Latin American experience<sup>9</sup>, and the heritage of Ronald Sider, a North American whose influence within the movement has been considerable, is Anabaptist. Within radical discipleship writings there are not infrequent references to Anabaptism, and Anabaptism is recognised as a significant historical influence on the movement<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup>Rowland and Corner have differentiated these positions as follows: "The 'radicals' only claim to be presenting the other side of a single coin, a neglected counterpoint in the scriptural harmony. The theology of liberation, on the other hand, perceives a divided text. It argues that the biblical tradition is not homogeneous": Rowland & Corner, Liberating 191.

<sup>8</sup>Although the focus in this section will be on the Latin American expression of radical discipleship, writers from other parts of the world who share this perspective will also be quoted.

<sup>9</sup>Both through his writings and his participation in symposia and conferences (for example those reported in Schipani, Freedom and Sider, Chicago). His seminal The Politics of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) has encouraged a reassessment of the significance of a Christocentric approach to economic, political and social issues.

<sup>10</sup>See above at p15.



Whether Anabaptism has been the source of certain emphases within radical discipleship or not, there are several significant areas of agreement. First, both movements have been concerned to make disciples rather than converts. Just as the Anabaptists criticised the Reformers for seemingly neglecting the New Testament teaching on discipleship and producing only "mouth-Christians"<sup>11</sup>, so radical discipleship has advocated a greater commitment to discipleship and has identified various issues - economic, social and ideological - where evangelicals and others have seemed reticent to apply the norms of discipleship. Second, the use of the term "radical" in relation to both movements has similar implications. Both have adopted positions on issues such as economics, lifestyle and community that call for radical action and costly changes to traditional patterns. Both, likewise, have been regarded as politically radical and dangerous. Third, both movements have been opposed to "civil religion". For Anabaptists, this meant a wholesale rejection of Constantinianism and the formation of believers' churches. In radical discipleship, the implications have begun to be explored<sup>12</sup>, but have not yet been fully worked through. The kind of State/Church relationship that sanctifies and endorses the status quo has been castigated, but the ecclesiological radicalism that Anabaptism exhibited has not yet been implemented. The

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<sup>11</sup>See above at p259.

<sup>12</sup>Samuel Escobar, for example, has written: "Maybe developments are calling us evangelicals also to attempt an escape from the Constantinian captivity of the Church - not into Marxism dressed with the rhetoric of liberation theology, but into a New Testament Christianity that takes seriously again what it means to call JESUS and ONLY JESUS - not Mammon - Lord". See Escobar: "Reflections", in Sider, Chicago 121. This statement is interesting both in that it seems to identify liberation theology as a form of Constantinianism and in that it calls for a Christocentric and believers' church approach similar to Anabaptism.

continuing membership of representatives of radical discipleship in state churches seems anomalous - although it is true that certain early Anabaptists, notably Hubmaier, also attempted to remain within the state church system until forced out by persecution. However, the rejection of "civil religion" is clear in both movements.

Others too have recognised the relationship between Anabaptism and radical discipleship. In his foreward to Daniel Schipani's collection of papers from the symposium which drew together representatives from liberation theology, radical discipleship and Mennonites to reflect on areas of common interest, Robert McAfee Brown grouped together the Mennonites and representatives of radical discipleship under the description "scholars who stand in the Radical Reformation-believers' church tradition"<sup>13</sup>.

However, with regard to the hermeneutical developments within radical discipleship, there does not appear to have been much awareness of or learning from Anabaptist hermeneutics. This is not surprising given the lack of interest generally in Anabaptist hermeneutics, but there are areas of agreement, the discovery of which may undergird some hermeneutical convictions of radical discipleship and encourage a consideration of other areas where there are significant differences<sup>14</sup>.

First, both movements have recognised the pervasive influence of presuppositions in even the most "objective" hermeneutical systems. Anabaptists

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<sup>13</sup>Schipani, Freedom vii.

<sup>14</sup>Issues on which radical discipleship and liberation theology agree, which have already been dealt with in the discussion of Anabaptism and liberation theology, will be noted here but not dealt with in any detail.



challenged the Reformers on this issue<sup>15</sup>. Radical discipleship has criticised both European interpreters and liberation theologians for allowing biblical interpretation to be unduly influenced by ideological precommitments. Second, both movements have emphasised the importance of reading the Bible with the poor and uneducated in order to discover how to interpret it properly<sup>16</sup>. Third, both movements have emphasised the centrality of Jesus in hermeneutics. Rediscovering the Jesus of the Gospels has given Radical Discipleship a more Christocentric hermeneutic than most evangelical interpretation<sup>17</sup>. As Christopher Sugden wrote: "We must read the Christian Scriptures from the central reference point of Jesus Christ, the carpenter of Nazareth. All the Old Testament points to the incarnate Lord, and the New Testament writings proceed from him"<sup>18</sup>. This emphasis on the human Jesus ("the carpenter of Nazareth") as the centre of Scripture sounds very Anabaptist and would find support in the discovery of their similar approach in the sixteenth century. Other shared

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<sup>15</sup>See above at p50.

<sup>16</sup>Vinay Samuel and Christopher Sugden have insisted: "It is very important to study the Bible with the poor": Samuel & Sugden, Evangelism 145. On the Anabaptists, see above at p77.

<sup>17</sup>Jim Wallis, a North American leader of Radical Discipleship has written in his autobiography: "I read mostly in the Gospels...I concentrated on the Sermon on the Mount. It was startling to me that I could not recall a sermon ever preached on this manifesto of Christ's new social order in my church when I was growing up...The Sermon revealed to me what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God...The Gospel story captured my imagination": Wallis, New 70. Chris Sugden has described the similar spiritual pilgrimage of many within Radical Discipleship: "They have gone back afresh to the Gospels. They have examined the lifestyle of Jesus in the socio-economic and political context of his time...they have discovered a new depth of meaning in the Gospels": Sugden, Radical 145-6. See also Bill Kellermann: "The Clearing of the Temple: Jesus and Symbolic Action", in Wallis, Rise 256.

<sup>18</sup>Sugden, Radical 139.



hermeneutical perspectives include the importance of the Great Commission, a recognition of obedient discipleship as the goal of hermeneutics<sup>19</sup>, and an emphasis on the kingdom of God as a hermeneutical key<sup>20</sup>.

The shared commitment, mentioned above, to *sola scriptura* is significant in the light of its abandonment within liberation hermeneutics. Similar criticisms of liberation hermeneutics to those suggested above<sup>21</sup> based on an Anabaptist perspective have been made from within the radical discipleship movement. Emilio Nunez has commented: "The norm or hermeneutical principle determining the meaning of liberation theology is not the biblical text but the social context and the social praxis of the church. Evangelical theologians, committed to the principle of *sola scriptura*, cannot avoid holding strong reservations concerning the relativizing of the Word of God in liberation theology"<sup>22</sup>. Both Anabaptism and radical discipleship testify to the possibility of retaining a commitment to *sola scriptura* without allowing this to prevent the exploration of issues and

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<sup>19</sup>"The goal of Bible study", wrote Chris Sugden, "is not to produce abstract theological truths and fit together a jigsaw of biblical doctrines. The goal is to seek by word and deed to incarnate in our context the words and works of Jesus...The point that Christians who are discussing radical discipleship are making about Bible study is that we cannot fully understand or interpret the Bible's meaning for us unless obedience in our context is part of the process and a goal of the process": Sugden, Radical 140.

<sup>20</sup>On this see Kirk, Liberation 187-198.

<sup>21</sup>See above at pp363-4.

<sup>22</sup>Nunez: "The Church in the Liberation Theology of Gutierrez: Description and Hermeneutical Analysis", in Carson, Biblical 172. Orlando Costas has likewise criticised the "situational hermeneutic" of liberation theology, its illegitimate redefinition of key biblical terms, and its refusal to "consider Scripture a primary frame of reference". See Costas, Orlando: The Church and its Mission (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1974) 232, 251. See also Costas, Orlando: Christ Outside the Gate (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984) 130-1.

hermeneutical practices that liberation theologians have regarded as incompatible with *sola scriptura*<sup>23</sup>. Although in both movements there is evident a similar interest to that of liberation theologians in exploring these issues and developing these practices, their retention of *sola scriptura* has assisted both movements in testing ideological commitments against Scripture rather than allowing these to relativise or contradict Scripture<sup>24</sup>.

The discovery of Anabaptist hermeneutics, therefore, has the potential to undergird and endorse the hermeneutical convictions of radical discipleship through its provision of instructive sixteenth century parallels. The existing recognition within radical discipleship of Anabaptism as a source of inspiration suggests that an extension of Anabaptist influence into the area of hermeneutics might be both welcome and profitable. However, as

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<sup>23</sup>Issues such as the historical use of Scripture as an instrument of oppression, and hermeneutical practices such as allowing uneducated groups to determine the significance of biblical texts for their own context.

<sup>24</sup>It is not claimed that ideological commitments are thereby necessarily submitted to Scripture rather than masquerading as biblical teaching or operating upon the unconscious of the interpreter. But the commitment to *sola scriptura* does provide a standard against which to weigh presuppositions once these are identified and challenged. Rene Padilla, for example, admitted: "I recognize the possibility of reading the Bible in order to find support for a lifestyle conformed to leftist ideology. My honest desire is to hear and to help others to hear what the Spirit of God is saying to the church today": Padilla, Mission 171. Similarly Jim Wallis admitted: "Radical Christians have not always been true to the whole counsel of God's judgments. An ideological selectivity intrudes...Radical proof-texting is no better than fundamentalist proof-texting". His commitment to *sola scriptura*, however, caused him to recognise this weakness and to restate his conviction that "the Word of God is intended to judge all our priorities, to overturn all our biases, to correct all our perceptions": Wallis, Jim: The New Radical (Tring, Herts: Lion, 1983) 154-5.



will now be explored, the recognition of certain significant differences in the hermeneutics of these movements also offers some instructive Anabaptist insights that might help identify certain deficiencies in the hermeneutics of radical discipleship and assist its further development.

Thus, although both movements emphasise that interpretation is not the preserve of individuals, their contribution to the model of the hermeneutic community is quite different. A weakness of radical discipleship has been its inability to become rooted in local congregations<sup>25</sup> and its consequent dependence on theologians and missiologists. Unlike both Anabaptism and liberation theology, and despite its emphasis on the poor and on community, there is little evidence that radical discipleship has emerged from grass-roots discoveries or is informed by such<sup>26</sup>. Although the relationship between scholars and congregations may be better in the

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<sup>25</sup>There are several community expressions in Latin America and in urban North America, but these are neither numerous enough nor influential enough within the movement to provide an adequate hermeneutic community.

<sup>26</sup>Although this has often been advocated, for example by Samuel, Vinay and Sugden, Christopher, Evangelism 145. But there is little evidence that this has been done. Waldron Scott, for example, having declared that "we must learn to read Scripture through the eyes of the poor", asks how this can be done. His answer is that "a two-fold process is involved. On the one hand, we need to acquire a cross-cultural perspective by reading and studying sociology and cultural anthropology...On the other hand, we need to explore systematically the Scriptures for its abundant but often ignored teaching on the poor": Scott, Waldron: Bring Forth Justice (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 240. Absent from this typically Western and academic strategy is any mention of learning from the poor themselves or attempting to identify with them. Although Scott is not from Latin America, his writings represent a positive Western evangelical approach to the radical discipleship agenda. Earlier in this book he has acknowledged the influence of Samuel Escobar on his thinking: Scott, Bring 83.



Southern Hemisphere than in the Northern<sup>27</sup>, by comparison with both Anabaptism and liberation theology, this relationship is quite limited<sup>28</sup>. The paucity of Anabaptist-style believers' churches or liberationist base churches has arguably hindered the development of the movement, reduced its influence at a popular level, and resulted in its hermeneutics being more dependent on scholarship than may be considered helpful for a movement that urges that the Bible should be read with the poor.

One of the strengths of Radical Discipleship, however, has been its insistence that a global hermeneutic community is needed to interpret Scripture. Rene Padilla has written: "If the church is really one, then there is no place for the assumption that one section of the church has a monopoly on the interpretation of the gospel"<sup>29</sup>. Unlike the Anabaptists, whose communities were located in relatively monochrome cultural and social contexts, and unlike most liberation theologians who are similarly

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<sup>27</sup>Branson, Mark L: "Response to Escobar", in Branson & Padilla, Conflict 9.

<sup>28</sup>Orlando Costas has acknowledged the importance of this issue for Evangelicals in Latin America: Costas, contributing to a discussion recorded in Branson & Padilla, Conflict 24.

<sup>29</sup>Padilla, Mission 36.

limited, often by choice<sup>30</sup>, radical discipleship welcomes the contribution of hermeneutical insights from the worldwide church<sup>31</sup>. Since the centre of gravity within world Christianity is shifting towards the Third World, it is the insights of African, Asian and Latin American Christians which are increasingly being welcomed and the dominant European understandings which are being questioned<sup>32</sup>.

This global perspective is an important extension of the Anabaptist concept of the hermeneutic community<sup>33</sup>, one of the weaknesses of which was the tendency of similar communities to endorse each other's interpre-

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<sup>30</sup>Latin American liberationists and others do not claim to be developing a universally valid hermeneutic. See, for example, Boff & Boff, Introducing 32. They challenge the assumption that the dominant European model provides this and question whether such a universal hermeneutics is possible or desirable. Juan Luis Segundo's reaction is typical: "When [liberation hermeneutics] is accused of partiality, it can calmly reply that it is partial because it is faithful to Christian tradition rather than to Greek thought. It can also say that those who attack it are even more partisan, though they may not realize it, and tend to muzzle the word of God by trying to make one particular portion of Scripture the word of God not only for certain particular moments and situations but also for all situations and all moments": Segundo, Liberation 39. See also Rene Padilla's comments on this in Padilla: "Liberation Theology: An Appraisal", in Schipani, Freedom 39. Radical discipleship offers through its emphasis on contextualisation an approach that acknowledges the place of partiality but looks beyond this to a global sharing of partial insights. On this see below at p426.

<sup>31</sup>The subtitle of its organ *Transformation* reflects this: "An International Dialogue on Evangelical Social Ethics".

<sup>32</sup>Although radical discipleship tends to express appreciation of the contributions of European scholars more readily than liberation theologians, and European frameworks are still used to express, structure and critique these new insights.

<sup>33</sup>As Lydia Harder recognised in her study of the contemporary significance of the Anabaptist hermeneutic community model": Harder, Hermeneutic 50-1, 114-5. On this, see further below at p426.



tations<sup>34</sup>. It is also relevant to the Anabaptist emphasis on the clarity of Scripture and the ability of uneducated believers to understand its "plain sense". A radical discipleship perspective would challenge the "plain sense" approach as ethnocentric and superficial. The reliance on the "plain sense" meaning within fundamentalist and especially "Church Growth" writings has been dismissed by several writers, both from the radical discipleship movement and elsewhere, as wholly inadequate<sup>35</sup>. What may seem plain in one culture may be either obscure or misleading in another<sup>36</sup>. It would seem, therefore, that this important Anabaptist

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<sup>34</sup>The sometimes bitter disputes between Anabaptist congregations may suggest that this criticism should be tempered, in that there was a readiness to challenge biblical interpretation in other congregations. But the sociological and theological similarity even between congregations that were antagonistic to each other on specific issues limited the scope of such mutual admonition. Liberation theologians have also addressed this issue in terms of welcoming a socially mixed hermeneutic community (even if they have not developed the same global perspective). Clodovis Boff, for example, wrote: "How then do we overcome our own prejudices ? One way is to engage in communitarian exegesis. It is an exercise in which the community of the faithful - lay and professional, male and female, oppressed and oppressor, adults and children, Blacks and Whites - read the text in a dialectical relationship, each questioning, correcting and enabling the other. This way the presuppositions of one community are mutually challenged and critiqued by the other". See Boff, Clodovis: "Hermeneutics: Constitution of Theological Pertinency", in Sugirtharajah, Voices 360. Similarly Elizabeth Fiorenza has written: "It is absolutely mandatory that people of different lifestyles, social backgrounds and personal experience become involved in the interpretation of Scripture": Fiorenza, Bread 38.

<sup>35</sup>For example, Conn, Harvie: "Looking for a Method: Backgrounds and Suggestions", in Shenk, Wilbert R: Exploring Church Growth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 83-5; Bosch, David J: "The Structure of Mission: An Exposition of Matthew 28:16-20", in Shenk, Exploring 235, 241; Costas, Church 131; Padilla, Between 168; Kraft, Charles: "Supracultural Meanings via Cultural Forms", in McKim, Guide 317-8, 326.

<sup>36</sup>Hesselgrave & Rommen, Contextualization 63-4.



emphasis needs to be qualified by a recognition of the limitations imposed by the cultural context of the interpreter.

Radical discipleship writers have drawn eclectically on various sources<sup>37</sup> in order to develop an approach to this issue that is more sensitive to cultural differences. They have appreciated the increasing awareness of the "horizon of the interpreter" in both philosophical and theological approaches to hermeneutics, and the insights of evangelical missiologists such as Charles Kraft<sup>38</sup> and Harvie Conn<sup>39</sup>. They have adopted and used widely the concept of "contextualisation" as a crucial hermeneutical tool. Contextualisation recognises the influence of cultural factors at various stages of the process of interpretation - the cultures of the biblical writers and their intended readers, the cultures of those who have interpreted Scripture throughout church history, the cultures of those who are attempting to communicate biblical teachings today, and the cultures of those receiving such communication. Using linguistic, anthropological and sociological tools, the task of the interpreter is to decontextualise the text of Scripture and recontextualise this in the culture in which the

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<sup>37</sup>Rene Padilla refers to Brevard Childs' "canon criticism", the writings of Walter Wink, John Yoder and Juan-Luis Segundo, Walter Hollenweger's reflections on evangelism, black and feminist theology, and the writings of John V Taylor. See Padilla, Mission 96

<sup>38</sup>Kraft, Christianity, and contributions to many periodicals and collections of essays, including his "Supracultural Meanings via Cultural Forms", in McKim, Guide 309.

<sup>39</sup>For example: Conn, Harvie M: Theological Perspectives on Church Growth (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co, 1976); Conn, Harvie M: "Looking for a Method: Backgrounds and Suggestions", in Shenk, Exploring 79; Conn, Harvie M: "The Mission of the Church", in Armerding, Evangelicals 60.

text is being received.

There are two main types of contextualisation. The first asserts that the actual text is determinative and that cultural factors, though important, must not lead to the rejection of the text or its acquisition of a contemporary meaning that is radically different from its meaning in its original culture. The second operates more situationally and allows the context to determine, rather than contribute to an understanding of, the meaning and significance of the text<sup>40</sup>. Radical discipleship, in common with most evangelicals, has opted for the former approach and has defended this against accusations that it threatens the authority of Scripture<sup>41</sup>.

There appear to be dangers on both sides on this issue. Some evangelicals have welcomed contextualisation but have in practice given it little room to operate for fear of compromising the *sola scriptura* principle<sup>42</sup>, or

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<sup>40</sup>Donald Carson has summarised these two approaches (in reverse order): "The first assigns control to the context; the operative term is praxis, which serves as a controlling grid to determine the meaning of Scripture. The second assigns the control to Scripture, but cherishes the 'contextualisation' rubric because it reminds us the Bible must be thought about, translated into and preached in categories relevant to the particular cultural context": Carson, Church 220.

<sup>41</sup>Rene Padilla defended contextualisation against this charge: "I am not advocating here a relativistic approach to theology. I am calling for the recognition of a problem and a change of attitude...the renunciation of ethnocentrism and the promotion of theological cross-fertilization among different cultures": Padilla, Mission 36. See also Nunez, Emilio: "The Church in the Liberation Theology of Gutierrez: Description and Hermeneutical Analysis", in Carson, Biblical 171-2.

<sup>42</sup>This seems to be the approach of Hesselgrave and Rommen's book, Contextualization, and of Donald Carson's writings. See also Orlando Costas' comments on evangelical inability to participate constructively in situations where cross-cultural hermeneutics is necessary: Costas, Church 296-7.



because of an unwillingness to examine radically their own captivity to cultural factors and traditional interpretations. At the other extreme, the context rules and even mutually contradictory interpretations can be accepted as valid, in the relativistic sense that they satisfy the needs of groups in different contexts<sup>43</sup>. The radical discipleship approach seems to offer a reasonable balance here. Its evangelical roots prevent the relativisation of the biblical text, but its Latin American context<sup>44</sup> frees it to explore meanings that have not been obvious to Europeans. Its global perspective enables it to draw on various cultural perspectives in a way that Anabaptists were unable to and many liberation theologians have

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<sup>43</sup>See the criticisms of this extreme in Carson, Donald: "Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture", in Carson & Woodbridge, Hermeneutics 41-2.

<sup>44</sup>Although radical discipleship is not limited to Latin America, it is arguable that Latin American theologians have been more influential than others in the development of its distinctive emphases. Perhaps influenced by liberation theology, Rene Padilla has written, "we are 'pervasively suspicious' about our ideas and value-judgments. This suspicion about ourselves frees us to read the Scriptures in a liberating way": Padilla, Mission 98. Radical discipleship writers from other countries tend to reflect similar contexts of grappling with injustice and poverty as they express similar perspectives.



chosen not to<sup>45</sup>. This approach to biblical interpretation has been widely welcomed and can act as a helpful check on overconfidence in the clarity of Scripture, a tendency present among the Anabaptists.

With regard to the nature of the hermeneutic community and the ability of uneducated believers to interpret Scripture, then, the hermeneutics of radical discipleship seems to offer a more sophisticated and reliable approach than Anabaptism. The failure of radical discipleship to become established in local communities, however, and the disenfranchisement of ordinary believers that seems inevitable given the nature of the global hermeneutic community that it envisages, suggest that there are weaknesses as well as strengths. Consideration of certain by now familiar Anabaptist concerns may assist in the development of a hermeneutical approach to these issues that draws on the strengths of both Anabaptist and radical discipleship hermeneutics.

The primary concern relates to the issue of dependence on experts and the implications for hermeneutical enfranchisement. In the sixteenth century,

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<sup>45</sup>The goal of global conversations is not to produce a unified interpretation that is valid in all cultures, but rather to develop a variety of culturally appropriate interpretations that are locally appropriate, unashamedly partial, and yet open to insights from other cultural interpretations and submitted to the ultimate authority of Scripture. Gottfried Osei-Mensah has insisted that "the church in every culture has the responsibility to pray, reflect and work out the implications of obedience to the Lord in the light of biblical teaching and in the context of her cultural situation. In this ongoing exercise, the shared experience of churches in other cultures will be helpful; but it should never become a substitute for local reflection and decision making". See Osei-Mensah: "The Christian Life-style", in Stott, John R W & Coote, Robert: Down To Earth (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1981) 281. See also Pinnock, Clark: "An Evangelical Theology of Human Liberation" *Sojourners* (Feb 1976) 30.

the Reformers' reliance on scholars seemed merely to be replacing one monopolistic system with another<sup>46</sup>. Parallels between this situation and the role of scholars in liberation hermeneutics have already been noted<sup>47</sup>. Within radical discipleship, the emphasis on contextualisation seems to imply that some knowledge of anthropology, linguistics and culture is needed in order to interpret Scripture, thereby again disenfranchising ordinary believers and reintroducing an interpretive monopoly<sup>48</sup>.

But Anabaptist hermeneutics would want to insist that, despite cultural factors and the positive potential of contextualisation, the perspicuity of Scripture is such, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit is sufficient, that untutored believers can come to the Scriptures (provided these are translated into their own language and culture) and interpret them responsibly and reliably. Although insistence on the "plain sense" of Scripture can imply cultural insensitivity and overconfidence, it may also be a radical stance that protects the hermeneutic competence of the uneducated from a new monopoly of the culturally literate<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup>See above at p95.

<sup>47</sup>See above at pp355-8.

<sup>48</sup>This certainly seems an implication in Scott's strategy quoted above at p247. George Cummings has written in this context that "this methodology implicitly recognizes that the partnership that included only philosophy and theology must now be expanded to include disciplines such as economics, sociology and critical analysis": Cummings, "Response to Pinnock", in Branson & Padilla, Conflict 67.

<sup>49</sup>Anabaptists would be more comfortable with the insistence of those like David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen who, while convinced of the importance of contextual skills, insisted that the perspicuity of Scripture is such that any "student of the biblical text is able to gain a more or less accurate understanding of its author's intended meaning": Hesselgrave & Rommen, Contextualization 202 (italics mine).



Anabaptist hermeneutics, therefore, challenges radical discipleship to be true to its expressed commitment to reading the Bible with the poor, and not to allow this to be marginalised by overdependence on experts on contextual hermeneutics, and to trust the Holy Spirit to enable ordinary believers to interpret Scripture in culturally appropriate ways.

Furthermore, the Anabaptist emphasis on the shape and character of the local congregation as the most significant cultural factor in hermeneutics challenges the importance given within radical discipleship hermeneutics to the wider social context. If the Anabaptists were correct to see local congregations, especially those free from state control and suffering persecution, as sufficiently close to the *Sitz im Leben* of the early Christians to span the cultural and temporal gap, contextualisation may be less significant than radical discipleship assumes<sup>50</sup>. Alternatively, if the shape of the church community is hermeneutically more significant than its social context, contextualisation is not so much insignificant as mis-directed if it is concerned primarily with the wider social and cultural context, rather than with the shape of the local church in whatever social contexts.

This raises again the issue of Constantinianism. Ecclesiology has not figured significantly in Radical Discipleship writing<sup>51</sup>. Although there

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<sup>50</sup>This issue will be explored further below at p429.

<sup>51</sup>Except in North America where attempts to develop radical Christian communities in urban areas have been made, and where the writings of Howard Snyder have been influential. See Snyder, Howard A: New Wineskins (Basingstoke: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1977); The Community of the King (Leicester: IVP, 1977); Liberating the Church (Basingstoke: Marshalls, 1983). But even here criticisms of "civil religion" have often not resulted in radical ecclesiological changes.



has been opposition to civil religion, there has been resistance to the idea of planting new churches or directly challenging the Constantinian presuppositions of established denominations. It may be that here too the persistent Anabaptist challenge to Constantinianism needs to be heard. Perhaps, as with liberation theologians, Constantinianism is rejected at one level but not recognised at other levels. This inevitably has hermeneutical implications, especially for contextualisation, in that the culture of Christendom, within which interpreters have operated in the past and which continues to influence interpreters today, affects the presuppositions with which these interpreters come to Scripture. Anabaptist hermeneutics would point to the shape of the Church and its place in society as crucially important issues in contextualisation. These issues have not yet been adequately addressed within radical discipleship.

Two final issues arising from a comparison between radical discipleship hermeneutics and Anabaptist hermeneutics involve the much greater use made of the Old Testament in radical discipleship and the selectivity of their treatment of Jesus<sup>52</sup>. Although, as noted above<sup>53</sup>, the Jesus of the Gospels has been important within the movement, there has also been an emphasis on the unity of Scripture and a determination to apply Old Testament teaching on issues of justice and social organisation. Samuel Escobar, for example, wrote: "An evangelical hermeneutics starts from a conviction about the basic unity of the text of the Bible. It refuses to begin by establishing polarities between the Old and New Testaments...The key for the unity of

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<sup>52</sup>Since these issues arose also from the above comparison between Anabaptist and liberation hermeneutics and were discussed in that context, only brief consideration of them will be given here. See above at p362.

<sup>53</sup>See above at p371.

the text is Christological"<sup>54</sup>. This approach has enabled those involved in radical discipleship to use the Old Testament creatively and to develop responses to social and economic issues about which the Anabaptists, with their New Testament orientation, were largely silent<sup>55</sup>. From an Anabaptist perspective, however, this raises again the spectre of neo-Constantinian appropriations of old covenant structures and norms.

With regard to the marginalising of certain aspects of Jesus' teaching, this is a charge that might be brought by radical discipleship hermeneutics in relation to Anabaptist hermeneutics as well as vice versa. From a radical discipleship perspective, the Anabaptist approach to the Gospels was also selective in its understanding of Jesus' teaching and ministry<sup>56</sup>, as well as failing to give attention to the socio-economic and political context of his ministry. Nevertheless, from the perspective of Anabaptist hermeneutics, some aspects of Jesus' teaching seem to be marginalised or excluded, especially his teaching on nonviolence, in parts of the radical discipleship movement<sup>57</sup>.

Interaction with Anabaptist hermeneutics, then, offers to the radical

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<sup>54</sup>Escobar, Samuel: "Our Hermeneutic Task Today", in Branson & Padilla, Conflict 5-6.

<sup>55</sup>For a further consideration of Old Testament hermeneutics, see below at p444.

<sup>56</sup>On this, see also above at p363.

<sup>57</sup>See Yoder, John: "Response to Padilla", in Branson & Padilla, Conflict 99. North American radical discipleship writers have explored the issue of nonviolence more than Latin American writers, perhaps because of the greater Anabaptist influence there. See, for example, Sider, Ronald: Christ and Violence (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979 - significantly issued by a Mennonite publishing house).



discipleship movement a resource which affirms some but challenges others of its hermeneutical principles and practices. On all the issues studied - the enfranchisement of believers, the nature of the hermeneutic community, the use of the Old Testament, and selectivity in the use of Jesus' teachings - it appears that radical discipleship perspectives reveal limitations in Anabaptist hermeneutics. In return, Anabaptist hermeneutics indicates certain deficiencies in the hermeneutics of the radical discipleship movement: its failure to put into practice its stated commitment to enfranchising the poor and uneducated in biblical interpretation; its achievement of a global dimension in the hermeneutic community at the expense of other kinds of variety; its vulnerability, at least, to neo-Constantinianism in its use of the Old Testament and its inadequate ecclesiology; and its failure to move beyond a rediscovery of the Jesus of the Gospels to a more radical Christocentrism.

A recent collection of essays on hermeneutics by Third World writers was entitled Voices from the Margin. Its editor, R S Sugirtharajah, complained that "A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation, which is proudly presented as the work of distinguished scholars, does not carry a single entry by an Asian, Latin American or Black biblical interpreter. More revealingly, it has only one reference to the work of a non Euro-American scholar"<sup>58</sup>.

Although the writings of Third World theologians, not least those writing from the perspective of Latin American liberation theology and radical discipleship, are increasingly being encountered by scholars and churches in Europe and North America, there has been inadequate recognition of their hermeneutical significance. New European hermeneutical approaches in

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<sup>58</sup>Sugirtharajah, Voices 2.



recent years have preoccupied interpreters. Third World hermeneutics has remained a collection of "voices from the margins".

Anabaptist hermeneutics is a minority European hermeneutics that has been ignored or relegated to the margins for 450 years. As noted above<sup>59</sup>, A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation refers only three times to Anabaptists as a marginal sixteenth century movement. Anabaptism has been partially rehabilitated during this century, but its hermeneutics has not been considered significant. The parallel with Third World hermeneutics is clear.

The conclusion to which this study points is that Anabaptist hermeneutics has contemporary significance for the two examples of Latin American hermeneutics considered in this section. From a marginalised European perspective, it undergirds and affirms practices and principles developed by these contemporary marginalised Third World movements. At the same time, it provides resources for a critical analysis of these movements and suggests hermeneutical refinements. Furthermore, Anabaptist hermeneutics might be able to perform a mediating function, through the provision of a historical perspective and different sociological viewpoint, helping liberation theology and radical discipleship appreciate the contribution each movement makes to hermeneutics. This seems to have happened to some extent in the symposium referred to on several occasions in this study.

One possible, though speculative, further consequence of this interaction, is that a hermeneutics that draws on the insights of these three marginalised movements might have a broad enough base and a sufficiently

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<sup>59</sup>See above at p23.

significant hermeneutical contribution to be considered seriously by a dominant hermeneutical tradition that has hitherto dismissed these movements. If this does not happen, the likely result is that the dominant hermeneutical tradition will itself become of increasingly marginal significance in the light of the shift of gravity in world Christianity towards the Third World. The rehabilitation of Anabaptist hermeneutics might have a catalytic role in this process, but only if its insights are allowed to inform both the dominant European perspective and the marginal Third World approaches.

The growth of Pentecostalism in Latin America, referred to above, is one manifestation of the worldwide development during the twentieth century of a new force in Christianity, the Pentecostal/Charismatic wing of the Church, which has already taken its place alongside Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Protestantism<sup>1</sup>, and which is steadily increasing in numbers and influence, especially in the Third World. In some places, new Pentecostal or charismatic denominations have emerged. Elsewhere, a charismatic dimension has influenced individuals, congregations and denominational bodies<sup>2</sup>. The relationship between the Pentecostal movement that began in the early years of the twentieth century and the charismatic movement which has affected almost every denomination since the 1960s is complex and variously perceived, but detailed examination of this issue is beyond the scope of this study.

The focus here is on the charismatic movement and the significance of Anabaptist hermeneutics for the development of a hermeneutic appropriate for this segment of the Church. Many of the issues discussed are equally relevant to Pentecostalism, but attention will be concentrated on the younger movement, partly to avoid unhelpful complexity and partly because

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<sup>1</sup>As long ago as 1953, Lesslie Newbigin classed Pentecostalism as one of the three main streams of Christianity, alongside Catholicism and Protestantism. see Newbigin: The Household Of God (London: SCM Press, 1953). The phenomenal growth since then only confirms his analysis.

<sup>2</sup>Two historical studies of the development of the charismatic movement in Britain chart the emergence of these two strands and the reasons for their emergence. See Hocken, Peter: Streams of Renewal (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1986) and Walker, Andrew: Restoring the Kingdom (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985).



the possibility of Anabaptist hermeneutics assisting in the hermeneutical maturing of the charismatic movement appears greater than its potential influence upon the more fundamentalist Pentecostal movement.

The inclusion of a discussion of charismatic hermeneutics in this study of the contemporary significance of Anabaptist hermeneutics is neither because of extensive parallels between Anabaptism and the charismatic movement, nor because Anabaptism has thus far had significant influence upon charismatics, nor because charismatics presently have a distinct, sophisticated or influential charismatic hermeneutic. Rather, inclusion is justified partly by the increasing contemporary significance of the charismatic movement, partly by the evidence presented in earlier sections of hitherto disregarded charismatic elements within Anabaptism<sup>3</sup>, and partly by the conviction that interaction with Anabaptist hermeneutics might provide assistance in the development of a much needed charismatic hermeneutics.

Though the significance of the charismatic movement has been acknowledged by denominational leaders and missiologists<sup>4</sup>, the implications for hermeneutics have received little attention. This is not surprising given the lack of internal hermeneutical reflection. Hermeneutically, charismatics

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<sup>3</sup>The marginalisation of the charismatic dimension in Anabaptism has discouraged comparisons between Anabaptism and charismatic Christianity. The present study is thought to be the first attempt to consider the potential significance of Anabaptist hermeneutics for the development of a charismatic hermeneutics.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Benson, G P: "The Renewal of the Church - the New Community of Witness and Service", in Sookhdeo, New 76; and Shibley, David: "The Charismatic Renewal and World Evangelization" *Global Church Growth* (Oct-Dec 1991) 1-3.

have been charged, with varying degrees of accuracy, with both fundamentalist biblicism and with denigrating Scriptural authority in favour of spiritual illumination. Many charismatics, however, have simply continued to interpret Scripture as they previously did, according to their denominational traditions<sup>5</sup>. Emerging charismatic denominations have tended to adopt the presuppositions and methodologies of existing interpretive frameworks. An enhanced pneumatology has had little impact on hermeneutics. There has been recognition of the Spirit's work in bringing Scripture alive, and concern to balance "Word" and "Spirit", but little reflection on the Spirit as interpreter.

Nor have theologians perceived in the charismatic movement any great hermeneutical significance. The movement has generally been marginalised in theological circles. Charismatic churches have been regarded as enthusiastic, pragmatic, interested in spiritual renewal and building relationships. Any theological contributions they have made have related mainly to pneumatology, ecclesiology and eschatology. Although several theologians have endorsed this charismatic emphasis, and some theological

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<sup>5</sup>Kilian McDonnell, a researcher into the charismatic movement, has noted the tendency of charismatics to adopt other models of exegesis uncritically. See his introduction to Bittlinger, Arnold: Gifts and Ministries (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1974) 5. see also Packer, Keep 219.



studies have been undertaken, both from within and without<sup>6</sup>, it has usually been dismissed as unsophisticated and assumed to be irrelevant to theology and hermeneutics.

It is the contention here, however, that the charismatic movement needs a hermeneutics that adequately reflects its pneumatology. Such a hermeneutic could have a significant corrective influence on hermeneutical systems that have marginalised the work of the Spirit. Anabaptist hermeneutics could provide informative parallels and a helpful stimulus to assist in this process. Setting aside traditional presentations of Anabaptism as heretical<sup>7</sup> or non-charismatic<sup>8</sup> that have discouraged interaction with this sixteenth century movement, and discovering the common ground detailed above<sup>9</sup>, would provide a basis for such interaction.

Parallels between the movements relate as much to their hermeneutical environments as to their own practices. Both have been accused of similar weaknesses - biblicism and literalism on the one hand, spiritualism, subjectivism and uncontrolled allegorising on the other - and have been dismissed and marginalised. Neither has displayed much interest in

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<sup>6</sup>In addition to the publication, *Theological Renewal*, see, for example, Bittlinger, Arnold (ed): The Church is Charismatic (Geneva: WCC, 1981); Smail, Tom: Reflected Glory (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975); Packer, James I: Keep in Step with the Spirit (Leicester: IVP, 1984); Quebedeaux, Richard: The New Charismatics (New York: Doubleday, 1976); Martin, Dennis & Mullen, Peter (eds): Strange Gifts ? A Guide to Charismatic Renewal (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984); McDonnell, Kilian (ed): Presence, Power, Praise: Documents on the Charismatic Renewal (Collegeville Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1980); Goldingay, John: The Church and the Gifts of the Spirit (Bramcote: Grove, 1972).

<sup>7</sup>In many Catholic or Protestant writings.

<sup>8</sup>In most Mennonite and sympathetic Protestant writings.

<sup>9</sup>See especially pp194ff.



scholarship, although acknowledging their indebtedness to interpreters and theologians within other traditions. Both have been suspicious of human reasoning and philosophy in academic circles, and both have expressed concerns about the neglect of the Holy Spirit in these other traditions. Within both movements there has been an expectation of the Spirit's involvement in Bible study, an assessment of teachers in terms of charismatic criteria, rather than academic prowess or institutional credentials, and an emphasis on discipleship rather than intellectual understanding.

Within neither movement have these convictions about the role of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation been developed into a coherent "charismatic hermeneutics", where both the role of the Spirit has been extensively explored and the hermeneutical implications of a more extensive pneumatology have been recognised. Within the charismatic movement the Spirit's role has been explored more extensively than among the more cautious Anabaptists. Among the Anabaptists more thought was given to the hermeneutical implications of their experience of the work of the Holy Spirit. The Anabaptists' conclusions on this issue distinguished them both from the Spiritualists, who tended to lose touch with the Word, and from the Reformers, who seemed to allow the Spirit little room in practice in interpreting the Word. Their approach might perhaps be designated as "proto-charismatic" - inadequate and tentative, but nevertheless offering help that seems otherwise unavailable in the development of a charismatic hermeneutic.

For hermeneutics in the dominant tradition that developed from the Reformers' legacy has not given much attention to the Spirit's role as

interpreter. Few textbooks on hermeneutics give more than passing mention to the Spirit as interpreter<sup>10</sup>. Many, like the Reformers, acknowledge the necessity of the Spirit in interpretation but then concentrate exclusively on other aspects of the task. Graham Perrins has carried out an extensive survey of such books and concluded that the Spirit's role appears to be negligible<sup>11</sup>.

Some proponents of the historical-critical method have acknowledged the Spirit's hermeneutical significance<sup>12</sup>. Some fundamentalist and evangelical interpreters have urged greater reliance on the Spirit<sup>13</sup>. There have been occasional instances of the Spirit's interpretive role being treated more

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<sup>10</sup>Robert Johnston, editing a volume on hermeneutics by representatives of various traditions, has noted in his introduction: "The contributors to this volume tend to subsume the role of the Spirit under one of the other headings - Scripture, tradition, christology and the present context": Johnston, Robert K (ed): The Use of the Bible in Theology (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985) 13.

<sup>11</sup>Perrins, Graham: "The Spirit in Interpretation" (taped sermon from May 1986, available from Springwood Tapes, Cardiff).

<sup>12</sup>See, for example, Baker, Two 113-4; Smart, Interpretation 190; Goldingay, John: "Expounding the New Testament", in Marshall, New 356.

<sup>13</sup>James Packer bewails the fact that "most evangelical textbooks on interpreting Scripture say little or nothing about the Holy Spirit". He argues, somewhat unconvincingly, that evangelicals do in fact honour the Spirit as "the great hermeneut", and urges this to be made more explicit. See Packer: "Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics", in Carson, Donald A & Woodbridge, John D (eds): Scripture and Truth (Leicester: IVP, 1983) 347. See also Shedd, Russell: "Social Justice: Underlying Hermeneutical Issues", in Carson, Biblical 195.



seriously and investigated afresh<sup>14</sup>. But such statements are usually accompanied by warnings against allegorising and spiritualising, and concern lest mentioning the Spirit will lead to the denigration of historical-grammatical studies<sup>15</sup>. As with the Reformers, there have been few indications of how the Spirit actually functions hermeneutically, so these statements rarely seem more than formal<sup>16</sup>. Nor have the Third World critiques studied above addressed this issue adequately. Although similar acknowledgements of the Spirit's role can be found, generally these have been as dismissive as European scholars of charismatic elements in

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<sup>14</sup>Several scholars have noted Karl Barth's phrase "pneumatic exegesis" and his emphasis on the Spirit as essential for interpretation: see, for example, Smart, Interpretation, 50. Some have attacked his position. See, for example, Thiselton, Two 88; Stuhlmacher, Historical 51. Other more positive references to the Spirit in hermeneutics can be found in Krentz, Historical-Critical 70; Keegan, Interpreting 162-3; Smart, Interpretation 52; Kraft, Christianity 224-5.

<sup>15</sup>See Fuller, Daniel: "The Holy Spirit's Role in Biblical Interpretation", in Gasque & LaSor, Scripture 189-192; Frame, John: "The Spirit and the Scripture", in Carson & Woodbridge, Hermeneutics 228-234; Thiselton, Two 85; Packer: "Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics", in Carson & Woodbridge, Scripture 337; Smart, Interpretation 121; Bloesch, Donald G: "A Christological Hermeneutic: Crisis and Conflicts in Hermeneutics", in Johnston, Use 100-1. See also Charles Kraft's critique of the marginalising of the Spirit's hermeneutical role within what he called "evangelical orthodoxy": Kraft, Christianity 224. And from an evangelical Mennonite perspective, see Yoder, Perry B: From Word to Life (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1982) 73-74.

<sup>16</sup>See, for example, the dismissive comments in Thiselton, Two 85, 88-92. His conclusion restricts the role of the Spirit in hermeneutics to theory alone: "The Holy Spirit may be said to work through human understanding, and not usually, if ever, through processes which bypass the considerations discussed under the heading of hermeneutics": Thiselton, Two 92. For others, the Spirit's interpretative role means no more than what is stated in the creeds of the Church, as Norman Kraus has commented: see Kraus, God 158.



biblical interpretation<sup>17</sup>.

Against this background, and because of the rapid growth of charismatic Christianity, the task of developing an adequate charismatic hermeneutic is urgent. Without this, charismatic Christians may dismiss hermeneutics as unnecessary, succumb to subjectivism, or live schizophrenically with a hermeneutic that reflects neither their pneumatology nor their spiritual experience. Furthermore, unless there is interaction between charismatic experience and hermeneutical methodology, it seems likely that the marginalisation of the Spirit in much hermeneutic discussion will remain unchallenged. There are two problems associated with this. Charismatics will remain suspicious of scholarship as an unspiritual exercise and will ignore the contributions of biblical scholarship from which they might otherwise benefit. And biblical scholars will continue to pay lip service only to a dimension that could assist their understanding of Scripture.

To the task of developing contemporary charismatic hermeneutics Anabaptism cannot offer a fully operative historical model. The role of the Spirit in biblical interpretation was recognised but they did not fully develop the

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<sup>17</sup>See, for example, Mercadante, Linda: "Response to Pinnock", in Branson & Padilla, Conflict 58;

charismatic elements in their hermeneutics<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, the Anabaptists failed effectively to integrate scholarship into their hermeneutics, to the detriment of the ongoing movement. However, Anabaptist hermeneutics does provide a helpful historical starting point and some clues in the search for a hermeneutics that makes room for the Spirit's interpretive activity.

The Anabaptist contribution includes several elements. At a very basic level, the degree of success they achieved in their struggle to escape the perils of individualistic subjectivism and arid intellectualism in the sixteenth century, and to hold in tension "Word" and "Spirit", offers helpful historical parallels containing both warnings and encouragements to charismatics who perceive the same struggle at the end of the twentieth century. Other elements, to be examined in this section, include their identification of 1 Corinthians 14 as a key biblical passage on the work of the Spirit in the gathered congregation; their insistence that application is integral to the interpretive process; and their focus on the communal context as the primary, though not exclusive, locus of the Spirit's interpretive activity.

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<sup>18</sup>Indeed, many contemporary Mennonite interpreters seem to be operating on traditional Protestant principles rather than giving scope for the Spirit's activity. Perry Yoder, for example, has concluded: "The rigorous study of the Bible which leads to real understanding is the best way we have of allowing the Spirit to guide us": Yoder, From vi. Philip Wood has noted that "contemporary Mennonite hermeneutics are emerging from a period of strong Fundamentalist influence to reaffirm the older Anabaptist understanding of hermeneutic community as the interpreter of Scripture": Wood, Hermeneutic 9. The recovery of a more charismatic hermeneutic would be a further recovery, and an authentic development, of their Anabaptist heritage.



Because I Corinthians 14 has been popular and important both among Anabaptists and in contemporary charismatic circles, a consideration of its implications for a charismatic hermeneutics will provide a focus for assessing the contemporary significance of Anabaptist hermeneutics for the charismatic movement. The two movements have drawn on this chapter differently. Charismatics have concentrated on the guidelines provided in this chapter for the use of certain spiritual gifts. They have understood the references to prophets speaking and their words being tested as requiring prophetic utterances to be weighed in the light of certain biblical guidelines<sup>19</sup>. For Anabaptists, this chapter undergirded their commitment to participatory congregational biblical interpretation<sup>20</sup>. To them these references not only taught the importance of testing prophetic utterances, which they also experienced<sup>21</sup>. They also seemed to have wider hermeneutical implications, encouraging all members both to interpret Scripture and to test interpretations. I Corinthians 14 provided the basis upon which Anabaptist leaders could urge the whole movement to "prophecy", by offering an interpretation of a biblical passage, and to "test" prophecy, by considering this interpretation in the context of a congregational hermeneutic community. The scope of prophecy and the role of the prophet seems to have been more extensive in Anabaptism, including the charismatic practice of bringing a message of exhortation, revelation or encouragement, but embracing also the interpretation of biblical teaching.

This hermeneutical role of the prophet requires further study. The failure

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<sup>19</sup>In particular, agreement with Scripture, acknowledgement of Jesus as the incarnate Lord, ability to edify the church, and conveyance through a person whose lifestyle was Christian.

<sup>20</sup>See above at p232.

<sup>21</sup>For examples, see above at p199.



to appreciate the prophet's hermeneutical role may be attributed to two factors: the marginalising of the prophetic ministry in Catholic and Protestant churches; and the failure to recognise the hermeneutical significance of the prophet in groups where the prophetic ministry has been valued.

The predominant ministries within Catholic and Protestant circles have been those of the pastor and teacher. The main gifting associated with biblical interpreters through the centuries has been that of teaching. Theologians, scholars and preachers have been recognised as teachers, imparting information and understanding gained through study and training. The prophetic ministry has been largely ignored and has certainly been accorded no role in hermeneutics. Among charismatics (where the teaching ministry has been accepted and valued - although differently accredited), the role of the prophet has been given greater prominence than in Catholic or Protestant churches. But the prophet's role has rarely been associated with hermeneutics. Prophecy has often been restricted to exhortation based only loosely on Scripture (albeit usually subject to testing against the plumbline of Scripture).

But there are biblical grounds for establishing a connection between prophecy and hermeneutics. The ministries of many Old Testament prophets included interpretation and application of Old Testament law and history alongside exhortation and encouragement. Similarly the book of Revelation in the New Testament can be seen as, at least in part, a reinterpretation of many Old Testament passages. What is required for such a connection to be restored to contemporary hermeneutics is the recovery of the ministry of the prophet and the recognition that prophecy has hermeneutical

significance. The charismatic recovery of the gift of prophecy and the ministry of the prophet provides the former requirement. The Anabaptist interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14 contributes the latter<sup>22</sup>. Anabaptist hermeneutics can assist in the realisation of the hermeneutical potential of the prophetic ministry within contemporary charismatic churches.

Another feature of 1 Corinthians 14 is the balance between "mind" and "spirit", both aspects of the human psyche being operative in hearing the word of God. Admittedly, identifying "word" with teacher and "spirit" with prophet is simplistic and fails to recognise the prophet's role as speaker of God's word and the teacher's need of the Spirit's guidance. But there does seem to be a basis in this chapter for a more explicit partnership in hermeneutics between teacher and prophet, between the intellectual and the spiritual. Such a partnership finds support in several other biblical passages. Both teachers and prophets function within leadership groups seeking to discern the will of God<sup>23</sup>. Apostles and prophets together laid doctrinal foundations in the early churches<sup>24</sup>. Spiritual insight is needed to augment and correct human wisdom and intellect if the words and actions of God are to be understood<sup>25</sup>. The prophetic ministry is complementary to the teaching ministry, holding out the prospect of a more holistic hermeneutics if such a partnership is operating.

The historical-critical method has emphasised the intellectual component

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<sup>22</sup>John Yoder has referred to the contributions of both teachers and prophets in theological articulation. See Yoder, John H: "The Use of the Bible in Theology", in Johnston, Use 118.

<sup>23</sup>Acts 13:1-3.

<sup>24</sup>Ephesians 2:20; 3:5.

<sup>25</sup>1 Corinthians 2:1-16.



of hermeneutics, with the interpreter functioning as teacher. Valuable as this paradigm has been, its limitations are increasingly being recognised, not only by charismatics. Several non-charismatics have been urging a rediscovery of other, non-intellectual, components. Clodovis Boff wrote: "The historical-critical method is one among many of the tools applied to read the Bible, and its limitations are well-documented...The *Dhvani* method stresses the 'evocative', the 'beauty' of the passage, and its emotive grip on the hearer or reader"<sup>26</sup>. Willard Swartley has called for greater openness to the Spirit's "paranormal" activity in interpretation and for "a dynamic interaction between the hard discipline of study and the uplifting breakthroughs of creative insight"<sup>27</sup>. Others have urged a reassessment of medieval methods which were intellectually unsatisfactory but more satisfying spiritually, whereas many find the historical-critical method intellectually responsible but spiritually arid<sup>28</sup>. And allegory, typology and the *sensus plenior*, once widely dismissed, are now receiving

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<sup>26</sup>Boff, Clodovis: "Hermeneutics: Constitution of Theological Pertinency", in Sugirtharajah, Voices 117. The *Dhvani* method is a Sanskristic method used by some Asian interpreters.

<sup>27</sup>Swartley, Slavery 224.

<sup>28</sup>David Steinmetz has argued powerfully along these lines: "The medieval theory of levels of meaning in the biblical text, with all its undoubted defects, flourished because it is true, while the modern theory of a single meaning, with all its demonstrable virtues, is false. Until the historical-critical method...develops a hermeneutical theory adequate to the nature of the text it is interpreting, it will remain restricted - as it deserves to be - to the guild and the academy, where the question of truth can be endlessly deferred". See Steinmetz, David C: "The Superiority of Precritical Exegesis", in McKim, Guide 77. See also Mercadante: "Response to Pinnock", in Branson & Padilla, Conflict 58.



more sympathetic treatment<sup>29</sup>.

The rediscovery of the hermeneutical role of the prophet<sup>30</sup>, to which Anabaptism drew attention and which the recovery of the prophetic ministry in the charismatic movement provides opportunities to explore, and the development of a genuine partnership in biblical interpretation between teachers and prophets, between the intellectual and rational components and the imaginative, spiritual and emotive components, offers a fresh and more holistic paradigm that retains the strengths of the historical-critical method, endorses this call for a broader perspective and will assist in developing a hermeneutic more appropriate to charismatic experience.

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<sup>29</sup>See, for example, LaSor, William: "The Sensus Plenior and Biblical Interpretation", in Gasque & LaSor, Scripture 266-275; Stacey, Interpreting 71; Moo, Douglas J: "The Problem of Sensus Plenior", in Carson & Woodbridge, Hermeneutics 183ff; and Young, Frances: "Spiritual Meaning", in Coggins & Houlden, Dictionary 649. Phyllis Bird has suggestively noted that the historical-critical method has more in common with allegorising than is usually realised: "The new historical-critical scholarship discovered a story behind the story told in the biblical narrative and read the narrative in the light of that reconstructed history. Thus the new approach resembled the old allegorical reading in finding the true meaning of the text, or the key to its meaning, in some reality behind the text - only it reflected the new spirit of the times by seeking a historical explanation rather than a spiritual one": Bird, Bible 50-1. It is possible that the contemporary rehabilitation of more "spiritual" approaches to Scripture may endorse the Anabaptists' more flexible approach rather than the dismissive attitude of some of the Reformers.

<sup>30</sup>The "prophet" in this section refers less to an office within the congregation than to a paradigm or approach to interpretation to which the prophetic ministry points. The "prophet" represents an approach to Scripture that emphasises (though without disconnecting) both the role of the Holy Spirit and the involvement of the human spirit rather than the use of reason and the human mind.

The prophet-as-hermeneut provides a number of distinctive, though not unique, contributions. First, the prophet emphasises application rather than intellectual understanding, thereby ensuring that application is not separated from the interpretive process. Application was an Anabaptist emphasis, has been endorsed by many Third World interpreters, and is the predominant concern of most Christians as they read their Bibles. While the teacher's vital contribution is to elucidate the original meaning of a text, the prophetic genius is to unlock its contemporary significance. The prophet's contribution would provide a corrective influence on scholarly approaches which marginalise application. Most scholarly treatments of the Spirit's hermeneutical role deny that he imparts information or enables comprehension, focusing instead on his moral pressure on interpreters to act on what they have understood<sup>31</sup>. The Spirit's involvement is anticipated not at the point of interpretation but of application. However, since application is regarded as a subsequent and secondary activity, the Spirit is marginalised in the interpretive process.

Although a prophetic hermeneutic alone does not adequately challenge this

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<sup>31</sup>Daniel Fuller wrote: "The Holy Spirit's role in biblical interpretation does not consist in giving the interpreter cognition of what the Bible is saying, which would involve dispensing additional information beyond the historical-grammatical data that are already there for everyone to work with. Rather, the Holy Spirit's role is to change the heart of the interpreter, so that he loves the message that is conveyed by nothing more than the historical-grammatical data": Fuller, Daniel: "The Holy Spirit's Role in Biblical Interpretation", in Gasque & LaSor, Scripture 192. See also Frame: "The Spirit and the Scripture", in Carson & Woodbridge, Hermeneutics 234; Packer: "Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics", in Carson & Woodbridge, Scripture 337, 347; Packer, James: "In Quest of Canonical Interpretation", in Johnston, Use 44; Ramm, Bernard: Protestant Interpretation of Scripture (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) 14.



understanding of the Spirit's role and his marginalisation<sup>32</sup>, a partnership between prophets and teachers in the whole process of interpretation does. The prophetic concern with application refuses to separate this from understanding and so enhances the Spirit's role in the whole process. The teacher is encouraged to rely increasingly on spiritual insights as well as intellectual reasoning and linguistic expertise; and the prophet is encouraged to allow his or her insights to be tested by the teacher's understanding of the text's original meaning. Both are involved in a holistic process that conjoins intellect and spirit, understanding and application. Furthermore, a charismatic approach to hermeneutics would involve the operation of spiritual gifts such as the revelatory "word of knowledge" as well as the perhaps more applicatory "word of wisdom". With reference to such texts as 1 Corinthians 2, a charismatic hermeneutic would expect the Spirit to have a crucial role in all aspects of the interpretive process<sup>33</sup>.

Second, the prophet directs attention to aspects of Scripture that teachers, especially those using historical-critical methods or operating apart from a congregational context, may miss. Although, as stated above,

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<sup>32</sup>In that a prophetic hermeneutic operating alone will itself be susceptible to marginalisation.

<sup>33</sup>Graham Perrins, a British charismatic scholar, has insisted, on the basis of 1 Corinthians 2, that the Spirit enlightens the interpreter's understanding as well as motivating a response to Scripture. See above at footnote 8 for details of the taped sermon in question. From within the Anabaptist tradition, Willard Swartley has endorsed such an approach: "God's Spirit plays a creative, illuminative role in biblical interpretation. The Spirit significantly influences not only the validation process, but also the interpretive process". By way of example he referred to "times of creative breakthrough, keen perception, in which mind and spirit work together in almost a paranormal way": Swartley, Slavery 223-4.



an identification of the mind with teaching and the spirit with prophecy can be simplistic, nevertheless the teacher, especially the scholar, typically and not unfairly is perceived as primarily addressing the mind, the prophet as stirring the heart, touching the emotions and addressing the conscience. Restricting interpretation to attaining an intellectual understanding of the text risks reducing Scripture to the level of a textbook or manual. Prophetic hermeneutics is concerned with other aspects of God's revelation, treating it more like a love letter, or a manifesto. This need not involve allegorising or spiritualising Scripture, but recognises that intellectual comprehension of the literal meaning of the words is but one part of understanding God's word. The marginalising of these aspects in the interpretive process demonstrates the stranglehold intellectual hermeneutics has achieved over the centuries.

Third, the prophet brings fresh insights regarding the operation of the principle *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres* and the unity of Scripture. Scholars, drawing on their knowledge of Scripture, can indicate historical, linguistic and theological relationships between specific passages and their wider context, or between diverse texts on similar subjects. However, the prophet can add another dimension to this, drawing together texts which seem unrelated but which the Spirit links together at other than intellectual or linguistic levels<sup>34</sup>. This seems to be how New Testament writers often used Old Testament texts, a method which has been

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<sup>34</sup>Without explaining its operation, James Packer has identified "the work of...synthesis" as one aspect of the Spirit's interpretive role: Packer, in Carson & Woodbridge, Scripture 347.

described as "charismatic exegesis"<sup>35</sup>. This process has been castigated as illegitimate subjectivism, but there seems no good reason why the Author of Scripture should not reveal such unitive features, and substantial New Testament evidence that He does this<sup>36</sup>. The New Testament examples suggest that consistent principles operate in this process, even if they are less exact than historical-critical methodology approves.

Fourth, as examples from both Testaments amply demonstrate, the prophet can function as contextualiser, applying Scripture into specific cultural, social and ecclesiological contexts. Biblical prophets took earlier texts and applied them in new contexts. The importance of contextualisation was

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<sup>35</sup>Earle Ellis wrote: "The early Christian prophets (sic) and teachers explain the Old Testament by what may be called charismatic exegesis...they proceed from the conviction that the meaning of the Old Testament is a 'mystery' whose 'interpretation' can be given not by human reason but only by the Holy Spirit. On the basis of revelation from the Spirit they are confident of their ability to rightly interpret the Scriptures". See Ellis, E Earle: "How the New Testament Uses the Old", in Marshall, New 214. John Goldingay acknowledged in the same volume that "charismatic exegesis may still be a spiritual gift", but he warned against jettisoning historical-critical tools as checks on this. See Goldingay, John: "Expounding the New Testament", in Marshall, New 356. See also Ellis, E Earle: Prophecy and Hermeneutic (Tubingen: Mohr, 1978). For an alternative view, see Hill, David: New Testament Prophecy (London: Marshalls, 1979) 118ff. For a comment on this issue from an Anabaptist perspective, see Klassen: "The Relation of Old and New Covenant", in Dyck, Witness 372.

<sup>36</sup>It may be objected that the practice of the inspired New Testament writers does not give contemporary interpreters grounds for similar hermeneutical licence; or that the New Testament writers were reflecting on, and discerning fore-shadowings of, the decisive Christ-event - something which has no direct parallel for contemporary interpreters. However, it is arguable that separating inspiration from illumination in this way is unnecessary, and that a Christocentric approach will continue to find the ultimate unity of Scripture in the Christ-event.



noted above<sup>37</sup>, but often this task is reserved for those trained in cross-cultural, sociological and anthropological skills, thus disenfranchising ordinary Christians. While the contributions of such experts may be useful, the prophet offers an alternative charismatic perspective on contextualisation. A concern expressed about contextualisation is that it "destroys any meaningful understanding of the Spirit's work in inspiration and illumination"<sup>38</sup>, in that only experts can interpret God's word contextually. If contextualisation is seen as the work of the Spirit, however, operating through prophetic insights as well as through research and cross-cultural expertise, the relationship between the Spirit and contextualisation can be re-established.

This relationship between prophecy and contextualisation has been noted by Norman Kraus as one aspect of the interaction of Spirit and Word. He suggested that, "in the bewildering variation of cultural settings, languages, political situations, and the like", the "word of prophecy" would enable the Church to escape "biblicistic literalism" and discover the true meaning of Scripture. He continued, "we should expect to see the Spirit of prophecy emerge among us with an authoritative word, especially where the gospel is newly proclaimed, or where a culture in which the church is already planted changes radically and rapidly"<sup>39</sup>. Kraus, a cross-cultural missionary theologian, was not dismissing the importance of linguistic and sociological expertise in the task of contextualisation. But he was concerned to emphasise the spiritual dimension of this task

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<sup>37</sup>See above at pp378-9.

<sup>38</sup>By Wells, David F: "The Nature and Function of Theology", in Johnston, Use 177.

<sup>39</sup>Kraus, God 159.



and, interestingly, he chose the language of prophecy to describe this dimension.

Prophetic contextualisation is a synthesis of charismatic and Radical Discipleship hermeneutical emphases<sup>40</sup>. The prophetic<sup>41</sup> interpreter listens to the Spirit, learns from other cultural perspectives, but remains submitted to the normative authority of Scripture. This requires greater flexibility than most Anabaptists displayed in discerning the "spirit" of Scripture rather than being bound by specific texts. The Anabaptists' concern was that the supposed "general drift" of Scripture might be used to evade the challenge of biblical texts. This danger remains, but searching for the "spirit" or "direction" of Scripture and its contextual application can be an expression of a determination to discover the full challenge and import of Scripture. Prophetic contextualisation also requires a broader understanding of the gift of prophecy and a greater degree of cultural sensitivity than has hitherto been recognised in charismatic circles.

Allowing the prophet to function hermeneutically is one aspect of a charismatic hermeneutic, where the Spirit's role is given more than lip service. The prophet relies not on intellectual accomplishments but on spiritual sensitivity and gifting. The anticipated criticism that this

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<sup>40</sup>On which, see above at pp378-9.

<sup>41</sup>The use of the terms "prophetic interpreter" and "prophetic contextualisation" implies that charismatic insights and the operation of the gifts of the Spirit are anticipated alongside cultural sensitivity and biblical knowledge. Charismatic ideas of prophecy usually neglect contextual and cultural aspects. Contextualisation often neglects the spiritual dimension. The use of the term "prophetic contextualisation" is a plea for this imbalance to be addressed, and for both elements to be valued.

methodology is prone to illuminism and subjectivism can be met in two ways: by stressing that prophets are to operate within communities that test their utterances and in partnership with teachers<sup>42</sup>; and by questioning whether this criticism, and the fear of illuminism, itself reflects a bias towards objectivism and intellectualism and an unwarranted belief that human reasoning is more trustworthy than human spiritual perception.

A second possible criticism is that this hermeneutic introduces another form of interpretive monopoly. Instead of pope, scholar or preacher, the charismatic prophet must now be consulted for trustworthy interpretations. However, as 1 Corinthians 14 indicates, and as both Anabaptists and charismatics have taught, all church members can learn to prophesy. Prophetic hermeneutics is open to all who are willing to listen to the Spirit. It is a mode of interpretation rather than an interpretive office. Although some individuals may be recognised as especially gifted in the area of prophecy (just as some are in the area of teaching), all can prophesy and all must submit to testing within the community. The influence of either teachers or prophets can disenfranchise congregations if the communal nature of biblical interpretation is not safeguarded, but there are no grounds for believing that prophets are more liable to exercise such influence than those with teaching ministries. Commitment to the "prophethood of all believers" is one aspect of this safeguard.

Another is an appreciation of the Anabaptist community model. In reminding

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<sup>42</sup>And other gifted people - evangelists, pastors, apostles. It is beyond the scope of this study to develop this further, but there is reason to think that many of the gifts and ministries mentioned in the New Testament could have hermeneutical significance.



charismatics that prophetic interpretation must not be allowed to operate individualistically or in an authoritarian manner, the Anabaptist expectation that the congregation was the primary locus for the Spirit's work encourages a continuing reliance upon the Spirit in the testing of interpretations. The Spirit's activity as interpreter is anticipated not only in his ability to speak through the prophets but also, and perhaps more crucially, in his ability to unite together a congregation in its testing of one or more interpretations of Scripture. This element is vital if charismatics are not to imitate traditional Catholic and Protestant hermeneutics and marginalise the interpretive role of the congregation, albeit in favour of prophets rather than priests or preachers.

The Anabaptist view of the interpretive competence of the congregation may have a further contribution to make to the hermeneutical development and confidence of contemporary charismatics. Anabaptists believed that their congregations were well placed to interpret Scripture because of their shape and social situation, as believers' churches in a persecuting environment. They believed this *Sitz im Lieben* gave them insights others lacked and enabled them to identify with those for whom the New Testament was originally written<sup>43</sup>. In contemporary terms, they were arguing for a fusion of their own horizon with the biblical horizon, on the grounds of similarity of ecclesiology and a shared experience of suffering. Their rejection of Constantinian presuppositions<sup>44</sup> they felt were alien to the New Testament was a further factor in this claim to "hermeneutical privilege".

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<sup>43</sup>On this, see above at pp283-4.

<sup>44</sup>See above at pp322ff.



There are parallels between these Anabaptist convictions and those with which charismatics approach Scripture. These need to be recognised and established as important elements in charismatic hermeneutics. Charismatic churches do enjoy an advantage in biblical interpretation because of their openness to and at least some experience of the charismatic phenomena of the New Testament churches. Passages that seem obscure and inapplicable in the absence of such perceptions and experience become clearer in charismatic settings. This does not preclude eisegesis and misunderstanding, but it does offer contextual assistance to modern interpreters. Charismatic interpreters embrace a worldview much closer to the supernaturalistic worldview of the New Testament than do many interpreters who are as locked into a rationalistic and modernistic worldview as they have been into a Constantinian framework<sup>45</sup>. James Packer has noted the distinctive "hermeneutical claim" of charismatics that "all elements of New Testament ministry and experience may with propriety be hoped for, sought and expected today"<sup>46</sup>. Charismatic hermeneutics can offer perspectives on the text that have been ruled out *a priori* by many interpreters<sup>47</sup>, and can challenge their presuppositions, just as Anabaptism challenged sixteenth century establishment presuppositions.

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<sup>45</sup>Even evangelical interpreters who accept supernatural elements in Scripture tend towards this bias in interpretation, at least insofar as contemporary application is concerned. Waldron Scott, for example, referred to Jesus "healing all who were oppressed by the devil" and drew from this a mandate for Christians to be involved in working for social justice: see Scott, Bring 88-9. Other texts may be used as a basis for this mandate, but the marginalisation of the supernatural and its transmutation into a supposedly "modern" equivalent is typical of interpretation operating within a non-charismatic framework.

<sup>46</sup>Packer, writing in *Renewal* (July 1990) 29.

<sup>47</sup>See Angel, Delusion 75.

However, the Anabaptist convictions that the shape of the church and its social position are important for its hermeneutical task contain warnings for charismatics also. Those whose charismatic experience has not affected their ecclesiology may need to question whether they can participate effectively in a congregational hermeneutic<sup>48</sup>. Furthermore, in Europe and North America, most charismatics are drawn from middle-class backgrounds. Presuppositions relating to this background must be identified if interpreters are to hear clearly texts written primarily for those who were poor and powerless.

The Anabaptist contribution to charismatic hermeneutics, then, includes encouraging charismatics to develop a hermeneutic that holds together "Word" and "Spirit", rather than succumbing to subjective individualism or adopting methods developed by those who do not share their pneumatology; encouraging further development of the hermeneutical role of the prophet; warning about the dangers of focusing on the "spirit" of Scripture at the expense of specific texts; and emphasising the communal context of the Spirit's interpretive activity.

Helpful though these contributions are, however, there are some important elements in the development of a charismatic hermeneutics that cannot be derived from Anabaptist hermeneutics. These are strictly beyond the scope of a study on the contemporary significance of Anabaptist hermeneutics, but two of them should be mentioned briefly as indicative of ways in which Anabaptist hermeneutics might itself have been developed further.

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<sup>48</sup>This is similar to the issue facing those committed to Radical Discipleship whose ecclesiology has been unaffected.



First, charismatic hermeneutics will address the issue of spiritual warfare in relation to biblical interpretation - not a subject addressed in standard hermeneutical textbooks ! The historical-critical method has no room for the New Testament affirmation that interpreters of Scripture are opposed by hostile spiritual forces intent on blinding minds and confusing thinking. Many evangelical interpreters would, if pressed, acknowledge such opposition<sup>49</sup>, but in practice this plays no part in their hermeneutics. Charismatic hermeneutics will need to give attention to this neglected issue that concerns the horizon of the interpreter and non-intellectual factors in interpretation. Such an emphasis would not have been uncongenial to Anabaptists who had a deep awareness of spiritual conflict and who regarded falsehood and deception, rather than ignorance, as the main obstacles to understanding Scripture; but it was not something they discussed.

Second, the priority charismatics give to worship provides a doxological context for interpretation, another neglected element in hermeneutics<sup>50</sup>, but arguably of significance in listening to the Spirit. The congregation

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<sup>49</sup>See, for example, Packer, James: "Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics", in Carson & Woodbridge, Scripture 347. Blindness in this context is more often attributed to human sinfulness, however, rather than to hostile spiritual powers. An exception is Athol Gil's comment that "we ought not to be surprised, as evangelicals, that we wrestle not with flesh and blood or that our blindness is not just on a very superficial level. Principalities and powers are at work blinding us in the way we read our Scripture": Gil, contributing to a discussion recorded in Branson & Padilla, Conflict 81.

<sup>50</sup>Mentioned, however, by Carlos Mesters in his article on the hermeneutics of Brazilian base communities. See Mesters, "Listening" 104.



can function hermeneutically, not only as they discuss the Scriptures, but as they read and reflect upon them in the context of worship.

One further aspect of Anabaptist hermeneutics should be noted as being of significance in the development of a contemporary charismatic hermeneutics. Anabaptist Christocentrism provides an important counterbalance to the charismatic emphasis on the Spirit. Although, as noted above, charismatics have rediscovered the Jesus of the Gospels to some degree, their interest has been mainly in his healing ministry, in his experience of the Spirit, and in his humanity as one who can identify with the struggling believer. Charismatic experience has encouraged the development of a more intimate relationship with God, and the human Jesus has been an avenue for this. There has also been a desire to imitate Jesus in his spiritual life and works of power.

However, Anabaptist hermeneutics would challenge the selectivity of this reading of the Gospels, and especially the seeming lack of interest in the ethical teachings of Jesus. This is an area where mutual interaction could be fruitful, for the Anabaptists gave little attention to Jesus as healer and miracle-worker, and did not exhibit their familiar determination to imitate his life in these areas. Most charismatics presently use interpretive methods derived from traditional Catholic or Protestant sources, where Christocentrism has not been influential. Their rediscovery of Jesus has been partial but sufficient to justify the exploration of a more Christocentric hermeneutic. The Anabaptist experience in this area may be helpful.

The Anabaptist emphasis on Christocentrism may also remind charismatic interpreters that the Spirit on whom they rely is none other than the

Spirit of Jesus. This should act as a further check on subjectivism, for what the Spirit seems to be indicating as the meaning of Scripture must cohere with what Jesus said and did as recorded in Scripture. The need to interpret these words and deeds of Jesus mean that a subjective element remains, but some parameters are introduced. The New Testament assertion that "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy"<sup>51</sup> requires that prophetic hermeneutics is essentially Christocentric. As well as relying on the Spirit as interpreter, prophetic hermeneutics looks to the teaching and example of Jesus as one of the ways in which the Spirit reveals the will of God and the meaning of biblical passages.

The potential significance of a charismatic hermeneutics is considerable, both to provide an appropriate interpretive methodology for the growing charismatic section of the world church, and to challenge a hermeneutical orthodoxy that has arguably exalted the intellect at the expense of the spirit, failed to appreciate the true nature of the biblical text, and marginalised the Holy Spirit. It may also be that such a hermeneutic would help Third World charismatics interact more fruitfully with liberation theologians and others who presently suspect charismatics of hermeneutical sterility and conformism.

It is possible that such a hermeneutic might develop without any assistance from Anabaptist hermeneutics (although it is likely to place less emphasis on the hermeneutic community in the absence of Anabaptist influence), but there are indications that the potential of hermeneutical interaction between Anabaptists and charismatics is beginning to be

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<sup>51</sup>Revelation 19:10.



recognised.

Stephen Knapp, for example, in his critique of evangelical hermeneutics, advocated greater emphasis on "the work of the Holy Spirit and the corrective influence on interpretation of a multi-cultural community". He continued, "Could the charismatic movement with its emphasis on the former and Anabaptism with its emphasis on the latter contribute to the development of an evangelical approach to hermeneutics able to find and keep its bearings in the face of this new challenge?"<sup>52</sup> Although it may be questioned whether Anabaptism provides an adequate source for the multi-cultural nature of this communal hermeneutic - the contribution of Radical Discipleship hermeneutics may be more significant here - Knapp has recognised that the Anabaptist communal model combined with a charismatic dimension, which Anabaptists recognised but which the modern charismatic movement has explored further, offers an important contribution to contemporary hermeneutics.

Perhaps the most likely setting for charismatic hermeneutics to develop under Anabaptist influence is in the House Church or Restorationist<sup>53</sup> movement, strongest in Britain and North America but influential in many nations. Although not well-represented among the poor, this movement shares several Anabaptist convictions: a believers' church ecclesiology, emphasis on mission and discipleship, a focus on the kingdom of God,

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<sup>52</sup>Knapp: "A Preliminary Dialogue with Gutierrez' *A Theology of Liberation*", in Amerding, Evangelicals 37-8.

<sup>53</sup>For general information about the history and theology of this movement, see Walker, Restoring; Virgo, Terry: Restoration in the Church (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1985); Vincent, Eileen: Something's Happening (Basingstoke: Marshalls, 1984); Wallis, Arthur: The Radical Christian (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1981).



confidence in the ability of all believers to interpret Scripture, reliance on the Spirit as interpreter, and a suspicion of scholarship<sup>54</sup>. It also shares the Anabaptist vision of "restoration" or "restitution"<sup>55</sup>, regarding the New Testament as normative for contemporary church life. Most charismatics are committed to restoring New Testament spiritual experience<sup>56</sup>. Restorationists share with Anabaptists a commitment to restoring New Testament ecclesiology also<sup>57</sup>. These parallels make Anabaptism potentially very attractive to this movement and suggest that Anabaptist hermeneutics would be found both congenial and helpful.

Two factors have hindered this potentiality being actualised. First, there has so far been little hermeneutical creativity within these House Churches<sup>58</sup>, most having adopted a standard Protestant approach, though

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<sup>54</sup>See Thurman, Joyce: New Winekins (Berne: Verlag Peter Lang, 1982) 69; Walker, Restoring 130.

<sup>55</sup>On this, see above at p11. It has been suggested that the concept of restitution should be treated as an Anabaptist hermeneutical principle on the same level as the six aspects studied in earlier sections: see Wood, Hermeneutic 13ff. However, there seems to be insufficient evidence in Anabaptist writings to justify this. Nevertheless, restitutionism was an important Anabaptist presupposition.

<sup>56</sup>The title of Michael Harper's brief study of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements expresses this: see Harper, Michael: As At The Beginning (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1965).

<sup>57</sup>Indeed, several interesting parallels can be drawn between the relationship of Reformers to Anabaptists and the relationship of Charismatics to Restorationists. Just as the Anabaptists were "stepchildren of the Reformers", so Restorationists can fairly be described as "stepchildren of the Charismatic Movement".

<sup>58</sup>See Walker, Restoring 130. However, a recent theological forum in April 1992 addressed this issue.

with greater reliance on the Spirit<sup>59</sup> and a more developed use of allegorisation in interpreting the Old Testament<sup>60</sup>. And second, until recently, interaction between Anabaptism and Restorationism had been limited<sup>61</sup>. However, the question of hermeneutics is increasingly being addressed within the movement, and awareness of Anabaptism is currently increasing<sup>62</sup>. The very positive response to a paper on Anabaptist hermeneutics presented at a theological forum for House Church leaders in April 1992<sup>63</sup> supports the above contention that within this movement Anabaptist convictions and charismatic perspectives might fruitfully be combined.

Of particular importance to the House Churches are the Anabaptist model of the hermeneutic community as an alternative to hermeneutical domination by "apostles" and "elders"<sup>64</sup>; the extension of their restitutionist hermeneutic to include New Testament ethical standards; and an appreciation of Christocentrism as the key to the interpretation of both Testaments. Of

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<sup>59</sup>Thurman, New 83.

<sup>60</sup>Thurman, New 96; Walker, Restoring 130.

<sup>61</sup>The one book on church history from a House Church perspective refers approvingly to the Anabaptists as sixteenth century restorationists, but devotes only two pages to them. See Matthew, David: Church Adrift (Basingstoke: Marshalls, 1985) 100-2. Andrew Walker has concluded, though, that many House Church leaders identify Anabaptism as one of their "radical roots": Walker, Restoring 140.

<sup>62</sup>References to Anabaptism are more frequently heard at House Church gatherings and among their leaders. See also Wright, Nigel: The Radical Kingdom (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1986) for a comparative study of Anabaptism and Restorationism.

<sup>63</sup>Murray, Stuart: "Partnership in Hermeneutics: Reflections on Anabaptism and Scholarship" (unpublished paper).

<sup>64</sup>Although formally and explicitly anti-clerical, House Church ecclesiology in practice tends to be oligarchic. Communal hermeneutics would require considerable adjustment.

significance also will be an exploration of the hermeneutical implications of the sociological differences between Anabaptism and Restorationism. Their ecclesiology may be similar, but their social situation and the absence of persecution require attention to presuppositions and to the issue of the "hermeneutical privilege of the poor".



Three inter-related issues have surfaced frequently in this survey of the contemporary significance of Anabaptist hermeneutics: the locus of interpretation, the role of scholars, and the strengths and weaknesses of the historical-critical method. This section will explore these issues in greater detail and assess the contributions of Anabaptism and the other movements already examined.

### (1) The Locus of Interpretation

Designating the local congregation as the locus of interpretation was arguably the most important and distinctive Anabaptist contribution to sixteenth century hermeneutics. The interpreting community was the focal point of Anabaptist hermeneutics, the context for the hermeneutical enfranchisement of every believer, and the setting for their reliance on the Holy Spirit. Contemporary hermeneutical discussion has both recovered this emphasis<sup>1</sup> and suggested important refinements and developments.

From diverse sources come pleas for the locus of interpretation to be restored to a communal context. The dominance of scholarly hermeneutics, the marginalising of the hermeneutic community, and the chasm between the

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<sup>1</sup>John Yoder has referred to the "hermeneutic community" as "a popular slogan which has become operative in the contemporary search to recapture the validity of the radical reformation tradition": Yoder, Priestly 117.

academic interpreter and the congregation have been widely acknowledged<sup>2</sup>. Terence Keegan, for example, wrote: "Today, virtually all Protestants, whether they are liberal or conservative, view the Bible in a way that accords to it an existence separate from the faith of the community. The believing community is bracketed out in biblical scholarship...Catholics who follow the historical-critical method have done basically the same thing"<sup>3</sup>. Various suggestions have been made and practical actions taken to address this issue. Some have built on the Anabaptist model. Others have reached a similar position independently<sup>4</sup>. Others again have introduced new elements that may result in the development of a more sophisticated hermeneutic community than Anabaptists knew.

For Anabaptists, the hermeneutic community was the congregation of believers meeting together around Scripture in order to learn how to live as disciples. The essential elements were the participants' commitment to discipleship, the communal context, the authority of Scripture and the

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<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Wink, Bible 10; Krentz, Historical-Critical 3; Gottwald, Norman K (ed): The Bible and Liberation (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1983) 2; Smart, Strange 27; Newbigin, 1984 46-7; Branson: "Response to Escobar", in Branson & Padilla, Conflict 9; Boff: "Hermeneutics: Constitution of Theological Pertinency", in Sugirtharajah, Voices 434-5.

<sup>3</sup>Keegan, Interpreting 20.

<sup>4</sup>Lydia Harder has collated evidence from several contemporary writers on hermeneutics (including Ricoeur, Schillebeeckx, Gadamer, Moltmann, Wink, Bonino and Schneiders) of the increasing acceptance of the need for a hermeneutic community: see Harder, Hermeneutic 68, 102-8, 126, 139. She concluded: "the new direction in philosophical hermeneutics towards an emphasis on a dialectical process of interpretation implies a recognition of the importance of the communal context of the interpreter...it points to an understanding of hermeneutic community as the context for the dialectical interpretive process": Harder, Hermeneutic 103-4.



goal of application. All these elements have been reemphasised in the contemporary rediscovery of the hermeneutic community<sup>5</sup>.

Although some contemporary arguments for communal hermeneutics are related to issues the Anabaptists had not considered<sup>6</sup>, many of these reflect Anabaptist concerns: rejection of individualism<sup>7</sup>; determination to be free from Constantinian influence<sup>8</sup>; recognition of the hermeneutical signifi-

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<sup>5</sup>John Yoder concluded that Anabaptist insights on the nature of the hermeneutic community "have been confirmed by further theological research and by experience": EBI 28.

<sup>6</sup>Some have argued, for example, that the nature of the biblical text requires that it be interpreted in a communal context. Luke Johnson has written: "Scripture is first of all a church collection...Scripture as Scripture is appropriated by a community. Therefore the act of interpretation (the hermeneutic process) must also involve the community": Johnson, Decision 35. See also Hauerwas & Willimon, Resident 128-9; Keegan, Interpreting 161; Harder, Hermeneutic 44; Smart, James D: The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970) 23; Brueggeman, Walter: "The Social Nature of the Biblical Text for Preaching", in Van Seters, Arthur (ed): Preaching as a Social Act (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1988) 128; Barr: "The Bible as a Document of Believing Communities", in Betz, Bible 25.

<sup>7</sup>William Klassen has concluded: "The point at which [Marpeck's] hermeneutic speaks directly to the modern church situation is in its rejection of rampant individualism": Klassen, Covenant 182. Marlin Jeschke has identified individualism as a dominant feature of both Catholic and Protestant hermeneutics. See Jeschke: "How Mennonites Have Done And Should Do Theology", in Swartley, Explorations 13.

<sup>8</sup>Jeschke, Marlin: "How Mennonites Have Done And Should Do Theology", in Swartley, Explorations 13.



cance of the "priesthood of all believers"<sup>9</sup>; and acknowledgement of the local congregation as the appropriate *Sitz im Leben* for understanding Scripture<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, the adoption of communal hermeneutics frequently results in the adoption of other Anabaptist convictions, in particular, that untrained believers can contribute towards biblical interpretation<sup>11</sup>, and that application should not be separated from understanding<sup>12</sup>.

However, certain aspects of contemporary hermeneutic community models proposed and implemented by various individuals or movements introduce elements that Anabaptists either rejected or failed to consider. These

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<sup>9</sup>Bruce Nichols, for example, wrote: "The biblical notion of the priesthood of all believers means that the hermeneutical task is not a purely private one. It is to be done within the framework of the believing community": Nichols, quoted in Hesselgrave & Rommen, Contextualization 57. See also Fackre, Gabriel: "The Use of Scripture in my Work in Systematics", in Johnstone, Use 211.

<sup>10</sup>Elizabeth Fiorenza has suggested that the interpretations of "ordinary" Christians, though limited by lack of expertise in linguistics and other disciplines, "might often be more accurate than those of the exegete because they and not he or she share the religious experience or the social *sitz im Leben* of a text": Fiorenza, Bread 134. See also Kirk, Liberation 182-4.

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, Fiorenza, Bread 134; Mesters, Carlos: "The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People", in Gottwald, Bible 125, 131; Harder, Hermeneutic 108; Higginbotham and Patton *Searching Together* (Winter 1984) 4-6.

<sup>12</sup>See, for example Joe Higginbotham and Paul Patton, writing in *Searching Together* (Winter 1984) 5-6. This semi-scholarly journal on hermeneutics has strongly endorsed a communal approach to hermeneutics. See also Fiorenza, Bread 31-2, 119; Harder, Hermeneutic 29, 68; Longman, Tremper III: Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation (Leicester: Apollos, 1987) 61-7; Kraft: "Supracultural Meanings Via Cultural Forms", in McKim, Guide 342; Barr, James: "The Bible as a Document of Believing Communities", in Betz, Bible 43; and Dyrness, William A: "How Does the Bible Function in the Christian Life ?" in Johnstone, Use 173.

need to be considered lest it be thought that the Anabaptist model of the hermeneutic community is adequate for contemporary interpretation. There is no doubt that this Anabaptist model was a radical alternative in the sixteenth century and that its contemporary influence has been highly significant, but it had several limitations which must be addressed if the full potential of congregational hermeneutics is to be realised.

First, the hermeneutic community need not exclude scholars, nor need scholars operate outside hermeneutic communities. Although Hubmaier, at least in theory, welcomed the participation of scholars in the local congregation, for most Anabaptists such scholarly involvement was neither feasible nor desired<sup>13</sup>. But a contemporary hermeneutic community approach need not imitate Anabaptism in its marginalising of scholars. Instead, this can be open to all believers, including scholars, and can welcome the gifts and contributions of all believers, including the gift of scholarship. The relationship between scholars and local congregations will need to be worked out carefully, since neither scholars nor local congregations are familiar with this partnership, and scholars should be subject to the same process of communal testing as everyone else, but the involvement of scholars in the hermeneutic community offers tremendous benefits. This will be explored further in the next section.

Second, the hermeneutic community need not exclude those who have studied Scripture in earlier generations. Anabaptists quoted earlier interpreters

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<sup>13</sup>Millard Lind has suggested, though, that "followers of the Anabaptist tradition" should welcome the insights of biblical scholarship rather than endorsing the reservations of their sixteenth century ancestors: Lind, Monotheism 13-14.



occasionally<sup>14</sup>, but they were wary of according them too much authority. This Anabaptist hesitancy to rely on even the most revered creeds and interpreters should not lightly be dismissed, but it does seem important, as writers from within the Anabaptist tradition have acknowledged<sup>15</sup>, that earlier interpreters should be admitted into the hermeneutic community<sup>16</sup>. Indeed, the Anabaptist concept of the hermeneutic community provides an appropriate model for including such earlier contributors<sup>17</sup>, even if this was not allowed in the sixteenth century. For the hermeneutic community can be seen as a transtemporal community extending back to the early churches. As with contemporary scholars, the insights of earlier writers

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<sup>14</sup>See above at pp75-7.

<sup>15</sup>James Reimer, writing from a Mennonite perspective, argued for a more positive attitude towards earlier interpreters: "this congregational hermeneutic must be seen in continuity with a much larger and longer interpretive tradition"; but he also affirmed that "our ancestry [the Anabaptists] rightly recognized the dangers inherent in a preoccupation with Credo to the neglect of simple Christian practice and obedience to the teachings of Jesus". See Reimer: "Authority" 139-40. See also Janzen, Waldemar: "A Canonical Rethinking of the Anabaptist-Mennonite New Testament Orientation", in Huebner, Church 105, 110; and Loewen, Howard J: "The Mission of Theology", in Swartley, Explorations 97.

<sup>16</sup>James Packer has argued strongly for this. See Packer: "Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics", in Carson & Woodbridge, Scripture 352-3. His positive evaluation of the contributions of earlier interpreters seems, however, to apply primarily, if not exclusively, to scholars and the dominant ecclesiastical tradition. The Anabaptist tradition would want to ensure that non-scholarly interpreters and the marginalised movements in church history were also consulted and valued. See Krass, Evangelizing 31; Yoder, John: "Is There Historical Development of Theological Thought ?", in Dyck, Witness 387-8.

<sup>17</sup>As contemporary writers from the Anabaptist tradition have acknowledged. Waldemar Janzen, for example, wrote: "The hermeneutical community must include the church of the early trinitarian and christological debates": Janzen: "A Canonical Rethinking of the Anabaptist-Mennonite New Testament Orientation", in Huebner, Church 110.



should be accorded no special respect but be tested in the normal way<sup>18</sup>.

Third, the hermeneutic community should include interpreters from diverse social, political and cultural backgrounds. A potential weakness of the local congregation operating as the hermeneutic community is that its presuppositions may be unrecognised and it may interpret Scripture in ways that merely confirm its existing convictions<sup>19</sup>. The Anabaptists' only safeguard was their synodal meetings, but these were limited in terms of the backgrounds of the participants. One response to this limitation is to accept that interpretations reached will not be of universal application and to remain open to further insights. This attitude characterised Anabaptism. Some contemporary approaches make a virtue of the limitation and question the possibility of a universally valid hermeneutic<sup>20</sup>.

However, the extension of the hermeneutic community to global dimensions and the welcoming of insights from many different cultural perspectives

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<sup>18</sup>John Yoder has described this process: "The authority and legitimacy of such statements is determined in their being received by the local congregation, not by their age or the judicial authority of the person or group who wrote them...It is because the Spirit is a permanent Presence in the church that bishops and synods, creeds and councils may be used of God; it is because the congregation is the locus of that presence that no creed or council, synod or bishop may stand in judgment over the congregation": Yoder: "Is there Historical Development of Theological Thought ?", in Dyck, Witness 387-8.

<sup>19</sup>Harder, Hermeneutic 50, 57; Swartley, Slavery 95. It is not only the local congregation, of course, which is in danger of this, as Third World scholars have pointed out in relation to the European interpretive tradition.

<sup>20</sup>This has been the approach of many liberation theologians. See above at p376. See also Kraft: "Supracultural Meanings Via Cultural Forms", in McKim, Guide 342.

holds out exciting possibilities<sup>21</sup>. Just as the four Gospels reveal different though complementary aspects of the life of Jesus, reflecting both the interests and backgrounds of the writers and the needs and cultural situations of their readers, so fresh light can be shed on familiar or obscure biblical teachings by interpreters who approach them from diverse cultural perspectives. But the functioning of such a global hermeneutic community needs careful scrutiny. Although communication and travel across the globe are now relatively easy, the extent to which such a global hermeneutic community can hold its members accountable, listen to one another and test suggested interpretations through application may be limited. Furthermore, within the radical discipleship movement where this has been explored, the global hermeneutic community has been predominantly a gathering of scholars from various cultures. The global dimension has been achieved at the expense of other kinds of diversity.

Fourth, the ecclesiological shape of the hermeneutic community should not be unduly circumscribed. Although the cruciality of the believers' church model for the functioning of a hermeneutic community has been noted, such a model may not be identified exclusively with a local congregation<sup>22</sup>.

Thus, a theological college operating as a hermeneutical community with genuine accountability and opportunities to test interpretations, or a missionary organisation operating similarly in order to interpret Scripture in a new mission context, might be considered as specialist forms of

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<sup>21</sup>See Yoder: "Is there Historical Development in Theological Thought ?", in Dyck, Witness 387-8.

<sup>22</sup>As writers from the Anabaptist tradition tend to assume. See, for example, Yoder: "Is there Historical Development in Theological Thought ?", in Dyck, Witness 387-8.



hermeneutic communities.

Just as the absence of scholars from the Anabaptist congregations did not disqualify them from functioning hermeneutically, so the predominance of scholars or "experts" in a particular institution or organisation need not disqualify it as a hermeneutic community on the grounds that it is not a local congregation, provided the essential elements of such a community are in place and the inbuilt limitations are recognised. An important element is size: the community must be small enough for personal accountability to be realistic and for consensus to be reached, or else crucial features of the hermeneutic community model cannot operate and there will be a reversion to individualistic or institutional hermeneutics<sup>23</sup>. Provided the primary interpreting community is small enough to safeguard these essential elements, hermeneutical conclusions reached in small groups can then be shared and tested in larger groups, rather than being imposed<sup>24</sup>.

The rediscovery of the hermeneutic community and its importance for biblical interpretation has been urged by various movements and scholars, but there are few examples of this operating in practice. Sixteenth century Anabaptism offers such examples. Its commitment to communal hermeneutics went beyond theory in a way that few contemporary suggestions have. There are aspects of the Anabaptist hermeneutic community which may

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<sup>23</sup>This qualification applies even to the global aspect of the hermeneutic community. The breadth of insight available from interpreters from different situations must be shared in a context where the other elements of the hermeneutic community described in this section can be incorporated. Many smaller gatherings of interpreters from all over the world would seem to be preferable, therefore, to a large conference.

<sup>24</sup>On this see Harder, Hermeneutic 29.



be refined or extended to produce a more sophisticated contemporary model. But their congregational experience provides a rare historical expression of a functioning hermeneutic community, from which modern expressions can draw inspiration and guidance. Anabaptist hermeneutics also emphasises certain elements which might easily be marginalised as this communal hermeneutic becomes commonplace: the emphasis on discipleship and the believers' church; the charismatic nature of the hermeneutic community; and the continuing enfranchisement of all believers to participate in this communal activity.

There are certain issues that need further examination. In particular, questions must be asked about the degree to which any local congregation or other manifestation of the hermeneutic community can claim to share the *Sitz im Lieben* of the early churches and so overcome the cultural and historical gap. Anabaptists were convinced that the continuity between the early churches and their own communities was sufficient for this<sup>25</sup>, but it may be that elements of discontinuity need to be identified and allowed to temper this conviction.

However determined a movement is to pattern its lifestyle and communal shape on the New Testament, it will undoubtedly make assumptions that are unwarranted and read its own convictions into the New Testament. The elements of discontinuity that result may not be harmful - indeed they may be essential if the movement is to be faithful to the New Testament itself in a different historical and missiological context - but they do require

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<sup>25</sup>As are certain contemporary scholars writing from an Anabaptist perspective. See, for example, Miller, Marlin in EBI 235.

some modification of any claim to share the *Sitz im Lieben* of the early churches. In addition, the influence of the wider social setting on the hermeneutic community should be recognized as a further complicating factor. The *Sitz im Lieben* cannot be restricted to ecclesiological shape alone<sup>26</sup>.

A related issue concerns the Anabaptists' identification of the fact that they suffered persecution as a key element in their ability to understand Scripture<sup>27</sup>, in that this too enabled them to share the *Sitz im Lieben* of the New Testament churches. But to what extent is the experience of persecution significant in hermeneutics ?<sup>28</sup> How significant is the fact that much of the New Testament was written to persecuted Christians ? Does the fact that Anabaptists were persecuted as heretics by other Christians rather than by Jews or pagans for being Christians make any difference ? Is suffering under an unjust political regime or living in a situation of poverty analogous to this ? In countries with a pluralistic and tolerant attitude towards religious issues it is not easy to suffer significant persecution. Does this disqualify Christians in these countries from being able to interpret Scripture authentically ?

Finally, an emphasis on the community of believers as the locus for

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<sup>26</sup>Lydia Harder has noted both these issues: "There seems to have been little awareness of the vast cultural gap between the situation of the early church and their situation. Centuries of church history and development of doctrine are not considered seriously enough. At the same time there seems to be an inadequate realization of the continuity of the congregations with the rest of society": Harder, Hermeneutic 56-7. See also Bonino: "On Discipleship, Justice and Power", in Schipani, Freedom 136.

<sup>27</sup>See above at p283.

<sup>28</sup>On this issue see Wood, Hermeneutic 19.

interpretation does risk marginalising unbelievers and the role of Scripture in creating faith. It may be that, alongside this emphasis on the hermeneutic community, there should be careful acknowledgement that the Spirit, as interpreter, is not bound by the hermeneutic community but is free to give understanding to others as yet outside the believing community<sup>29</sup>. Among the early Anabaptists, only Hans Denck seems clearly to have acknowledged this possibility, speaking of God's grace enabling all human beings to understand Scripture<sup>30</sup>. The hermeneutic community can be recognised as the normal and primary locus of interpretation without this being understood as an exclusive claim.

## (2) The Role of Scholars

The relationship of scholars to the hermeneutic community and their role within it, referred to above, needs further analysis. This is not an area Anabaptists explored, but it is important in developing a contemporary hermeneutic community. The temptation to devalue scholars and marginalise their contribution must be resisted if all the resources available to the hermeneutic community are to be used, since scholarship and expert knowledge are legitimate and valuable resources for this community. The development of hermeneutic community models need not be accompanied by a

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<sup>29</sup>See, in particular, Graham Stanton's discussion of this issue in the light of an understanding of interpretation as a process of dialogue, in Stanton: "Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism", in Marshall, New 69. He concluded that the starting point of the interpreter is less important than the interpreter's attitude. "Spectator exegesis" is impossible but unbelievers open to persuasion are not disqualified. See also Barr: "The Bible as a Document of Believing Communities", in Betz, Bible 36-7; Keegan, Interpreting 161; and Smart, Interpretation 50, 58.

<sup>30</sup>See above at p279.



fundamentalist or obscurantist rejection of the benefits of scholarship<sup>31</sup>, but by a determination to set scholarship in its proper context.

Anabaptists have been criticised for regarding scholarship as unnecessary or even positively harmful to discipleship<sup>32</sup>. This attitude must, however, be understood in the light of the fact that, whatever their evaluation of scholarship, their circumstances offered them little opportunity to avail themselves of this. The universities were closed to them, their own trained leaders were persecuted, and contemporary scholars dismissed their dearest convictions as idealistic or erroneous. It is conceivable that in different circumstances their evaluation of scholarship might have been more positive. Such criticism, however, usually assumes the onus is on those discounting the contribution of scholars to biblical interpretation to defend their position. But this assumption is rooted in the dominance of scholarly hermeneutics that both Anabaptism and some contemporary movements have questioned.

Scholarly interpretation tends towards several features that such movements challenge: overemphasising the intellect at the expense of the spirit, conscience and emotions; concentrating on understanding and analysis at the expense of application and action; asking and answering

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<sup>31</sup>Edgar Krentz has commented that "a rigid conservatism that reacts out of fear to banish scholars from the church... serves only to enshrine tradition in the place of the Scriptures": Krentz, Historical-Critical 78. Similarly Lesslie Newbigin, acknowledging the antagonism in the churches towards "the guild of scholars", concluded, "There is no way by which the Bible can be restored to the laity by taking it out of the hands of the scholars": Newbigin, 1984 46-7. The hermeneutic community needs scholars just as scholars need such a community.

<sup>32</sup>See above at p89.

questions that are of interest only to other scholars; domination by various presuppositions (such as those associated with Constantinianism), despite a supposed objectivity; restricting the task of interpretation to "experts"; marginalising the Spirit's role as interpreter; and lack of accountability to congregational testing.

Perhaps the onus should be on scholars and academic institutions, then, to establish the legitimacy of their role in biblical interpretation and to defend the fruitfulness of their labours, by showing how their specialist knowledge and mode of working can serve the Church. For there is no New Testament support for the isolation of teachers from other ministries or for the existence of a special guild of scholars operating outside the discipline of the churches<sup>33</sup>. There is New Testament support, however, for a congregational hermeneutic, for teachers who are spiritually rather than academically accredited, for application as the focal point of interpretation, and for the mind being only one aspect of the human psyche to which Scripture is addressed.

Many scholars have themselves expressed concerns about the role of the scholar and scholarly institutions. These include concern about the

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<sup>33</sup>John Yoder has concluded: "The one thing which the New Testament...gives us no ground for is the notion that the theological task could be exercised in isolation from the bearers of other gifts or from the surveillance of the total community". See Yoder: "The Use of the Bible in Theology", in Johnstone, Use 118-9.

questions scholars ask and the agenda they choose<sup>34</sup>; about the relevance of scholarly answers outside academic contexts<sup>35</sup>; and about the likelihood of misapplication without a community within which to test interpretations<sup>36</sup>. The underlying issue here is not the expertise scholars possess, but the way in which such expertise is employed, and the environment within which the scholar operates.

The influence of scholarly hermeneutics on local congregations remains minimal, particularly in the fastest growing segments of the Church. This represents a tragic waste of scholarly ability and effort. It deprives the Church of resources that could be of great significance. The temptation is strong to follow the Anabaptists in marginalising scholarship. Although this temptation should be resisted and ways found to redefine the role of the scholar, the warnings sounded by Anabaptism need still to be heeded. As on the issue of the Old Testament, where they were unsure how to handle

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<sup>34</sup>Walter Wink wrote that the "removal of scholarship from a vital community" was disastrous for scholarship because "the questions asked of the text were seldom ones on which human lives hinged, but those most likely to win a hearing from the guild": Wink, Bible 10. Similarly William Dyrness wrote: "Those whom we call professional exegetes...are to help people read Scripture in the light of their own questions - not in the light of problems scholars (or their German teachers !) say are important". See Dyrness: "How Does the Bible Function in the Christian Life ?" in Johnstone, Use 163. See also Thiselton, Two 22; Ens: "Theology of the Hermeneutical Community in Anabaptist-Mennonite Thought", in Huebner, Church 87; Fiorenza, Bread 119.

<sup>35</sup>See Kraft's comments about scholarly hermeneutics being at times an "academic game" in Kraft: "Supracultural Meaning Via Cultural Forms", in McKim, Guide 342. Lydia Harder referred to Kant's comment that detached from a living community interpretation was no more than "erudite exegesis" and to Ricoeur's comment that at its extreme such interpretation was "a mere exercise in logic": Harder, Hermeneutic 106.

<sup>36</sup>Thiselton (quoting Hanson), Two 95; Fiorenza, Bread 119.



it but they were convinced the Reformers were misusing it, so in regard to scholarship they were clear about its misuse in the sixteenth century but unable to redeem it. A redefinition of the role of the scholar is crucial for the health of the whole Church - including its scholars; and the rehabilitation of the scholar in movements where scholarship has been marginalised is crucial for their development and maturing.

Combining the insights of Anabaptism and other "marginal" movements regarding the hermeneutic community and scholarship, the following picture emerges of the "new breed" of scholars that Millard Lind has called for<sup>37</sup>.

First, the scholar represents one manifestation<sup>38</sup> of the New Testament gift of "teacher" and is accredited similarly. Moral, spiritual and relational qualifications are as important as educational or intellectual abilities. Just as prophets are tested by their lifestyle as well as by the content of their prophetic utterances, so scholars' lives are open to scrutiny as well as their scholarly utterances. Immoral, unregenerate or isolated scholars may still have expertise and insights to contribute, but these factors will tend to distort their perceptions<sup>39</sup>, and so are

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<sup>37</sup>See above at p343.

<sup>38</sup>Though not the only one, since teaching may be by example as well as by instruction and is not limited to those with academic training or intellectual gifts.

<sup>39</sup>Although truth is objective, in attempting to discern what is true the hermeneutic community should consider the channel through which a truth claim is made. Although godly teachers may be wrong and ungodly ones right on some issues and on some occasions, so that the teacher's character does not determine the truth of his or her teaching, neither is it irrelevant to the testing of his or her teaching, as is normally assumed in academic circles. The general principle expressed in various biblical passages is that "good trees produce good fruit, and bad trees bad fruit" (for example: Matthew 7:15-20; James 3:12). Scholars should not be exempted from such testing.

legitimate areas for testing by the hermeneutic community. The primary tasks of the scholar-teacher are to provide the hermeneutic community with historical, cultural and linguistic information; to familiarise it with the results of scholarly exegesis; to explain how other interpreters in different generations and cultures have understood Scripture<sup>40</sup>; and to help the community identify subjective and inadequate interpretations<sup>41</sup>.

Second, the scholar participates in a hermeneutic community and is accountable to its discipline and affirmation in the same way as every other member of this community. The scholar's expertise is made available to the community alongside the other kinds of expertise available: spiritual insights, experience of poverty and suffering, the wisdom of age, childlike simplicity. Scholarly contributions are welcomed as checks on subjective interpretation and ignorance of historical and cultural factors<sup>42</sup>, but these contributions are themselves open to scrutiny. The scholar, the prophet, the evangelist and the pastor function as a team<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>"Transmitting to the present members of the congregation the tradition of God's people in the past" is how John Yoder has defined the teacher's role. See Yoder: "Is there Historical Development in Theological Thought?", in Dyck, Witness 387.

<sup>41</sup>Harder, Hermeneutic 114-5; Kraus, God 62-3.

<sup>42</sup>"What we need the didaskolos for," wrote John Yoder, "is to defend the historical objectivity of what the text said in the first place against the leverage of overly confident or 'relevant' applications". See Yoder: "The Use of the Bible in Theology", in Johnstone, Use 110.

<sup>43</sup>John Yoder has written: "The gifts of prophet, teacher, moderator, etc, all contribute to the process of theological articulation. They contribute best if each has maximum liberty to contribute in its own way and if the exercise of those liberties is itself coordinated in the right way". See Yoder: "The Use of the Bible in Theology", in Johnstone, Use 118. See also Harder, Hermeneutic 101-2; Ens, in Huebner, Church 87;

in order to help the whole community participate in the interpretation of Scripture. For such a partnership between scholars and local communities to operate effectively, there must be mutual trust and submission. The scholar must not expect to dominate the process of interpretation<sup>44</sup>. Nor must the community attempt to coerce or restrict the scholar<sup>45</sup>. The Anabaptist insistence on the enfranchising of all believers remains important, but must not be misunderstood to imply that all believers understand Scripture equally well<sup>46</sup> or to deprive the community of the very best scholarship available<sup>47</sup>.

Third, this hermeneutic community is concerned not only to understand Scripture, but to apply it and to understand its contemporary situation in the light of Scripture. The scholar's main task is to serve the community by addressing issues that arise from communal praxis rather than academic

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<sup>44</sup>As Lydia Harder has noted, "The congregational process of discernment puts the whole discussion of the authority of the specialized knowledge of the scholar...into a new perspective": see Harder, Hermeneutic 16. Similarly Norman Kraus wrote that "interpretive authority lies with the ecclesial and not the academic community", although he defined the former in historical terms rather than in relation solely to the local congregation: Kraus, God 62-3. And Willard Swartley suggested that the scholar should have a "catalytic function" in the hermeneutic community: EBI 329.

<sup>45</sup>See Hauerwas & Willimon, Resident 59.

<sup>46</sup>See Yoder, From 75.

<sup>47</sup>David Stacey, having stated that there is now universal agreement that lack of scholarship is not an impossible handicap and that simple believers can read Scripture without being confused, concluded that "no religious group that values learning can be satisfied with the ploughboy's understanding. Through its scholars it must probe deeper": Stacey, Interpreting 4-8. Although it is doubtful whether such universal agreement can be substantiated, it is certainly true that this Anabaptist conviction is now widely accepted. The Anabaptist tradition, in turn, is reevaluating the role of scholars as part of the hermeneutic community.



issues that are of little relevance to the community - although the scholar's involvement in the community together with his or her scholarly knowledge will also suggest questions that the community should be asking. Some scholars will have expertise relating to the past. Others will have specialist knowledge of contemporary issues. Scholarly conclusions remain provisional until tested within the context of the community's life and ministry.

Fourth, the scholar operates not only within a local hermeneutic community but within a global hermeneutic community, drawing on the insights of Christians, including other scholars, from many different social, economic and cultural backgrounds<sup>48</sup>. Through contributing in this community, scholars can participate in the process of contextualisation, offering their expertise regarding biblical culture, historical and doctrinal factors, sociological, anthropological and linguistic understandings, and simultaneously discovering their own cultural biases and presuppositions.

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<sup>48</sup>The extent of this community will depend both on pragmatic considerations and on the varying needs for cross-cultural consultation that different issues present.

This new breed of scholars would act as a bridge between other scholars<sup>49</sup> and scholarly institutions and the churches, enabling the churches to receive scholarly insights and working towards the transformation of the scholarly paradigm. Although liable to be misunderstood and criticised from both sides<sup>50</sup>, such scholars are crucial to the development of a hermeneutic that meets the needs of the rapidly changing world church, and to the release of the fruits of scholarship from the confines of academic settings for the benefit of the wider church.

### (3) The Limitations of the Historical-Critical Method.

Although mentioned frequently, detailed description or analysis of the historical-critical method is beyond the scope of this study. Nor can the many criticisms of this method be examined in any detail. But some attention should be given to the relevance of Anabaptist hermeneutics to

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<sup>49</sup>What is envisaged in this section is a "new breed" of scholars operating as team members within a hermeneutic community, not the abolition of scholarly institutions or the marginalising of scholars working in other settings. It is arguable that the existence of independent scholarship beyond the confines of the hermeneutic community with whom this community and its own scholars can interact should be welcomed. Establishing the locus of interpretation within the believing community does not mean that helpful insights cannot be received and the community's convictions tested through interaction with other interpreters. James Barr insisted: "It is in the interest of the believing community itself that it should not too jealously insist on keeping the interpretation of Scripture ...within the control of the church or other religious community, but must be open to comment and discussion from any competently informed quarter": Barr, in Betz, Bible 36-7.

<sup>50</sup>Willard Swartley has recognised that scholars may face tension here but suggested it will be a creative tension: EBI 329.

this still-dominant methodology<sup>51</sup>. The above survey of the contemporary significance of Anabaptist hermeneutics has indicated few areas of interaction. Certainly interpreters committed to the historical-critical method have given little attention to Anabaptist hermeneutics. Some commentators on Anabaptist hermeneutics have suggested areas of possible interaction<sup>52</sup>, but others have treated it as a pre-critical approach relevant, if at all, to presuppositional rather than exegetical issues.

Until recently, exegetical issues predominated in scholarly hermeneutics, but the influence of the "new hermeneutic"<sup>53</sup> has directed attention increasingly towards presuppositional issues - the culture, context, questions and assumptions of interpreters. Few critics deny the validity

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<sup>51</sup>Rowland and Corner have referred to the "magisterium of the historico-critical method" as dominating hermeneutics and the churches: Rowland & Corner, Liberating 36. Similarly, Walter Wink has written: "Biblical criticism is the new establishment. Now, not dogmatic Christendom, but the biblical guild functions as the harsh superego in the self of many exegetes": Wink, Bible 29.

<sup>52</sup>Daie Brown, for example, suggested that there was a point of contact between the findings of Form Critics and Anabaptist hermeneutics: Brown, "Radical" 255-6. Lydia Harder compared Anabaptist perspectives with both Form and Redaction Criticism: Harder, Hermeneutic 55. And Willard Swartley noted the similarities (and differences) between Marpeck's discussion of the relationship between the Testaments and aspects of the historical-critical method: Swartley, Slavery 144.

<sup>53</sup>For useful summaries of the "new hermeneutic", see Carson, Donald: "Church and Mission: Reflections on Contextualization and the Third Horizon", in Carson, Church 213ff; Thiselton, Anthony: "The New Hermeneutic", in McKim, Guide 99ff. For a negative critique, see Packer, James: "Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics", in Carson & Woodbridge, Scripture 344.



of historical criticism, but many are exposing its limitations<sup>54</sup>. Several new approaches have emerged in recent years - structuralism, genre study, reader-response theories, canon criticism, and many others - but practical objections are being raised about the value of these increasingly technical methodologies.

The issue of the relationship, or lack of this, between scholars and the churches has already been examined, but this issue is particularly acute in relation to the historical-critical method employed by scholars<sup>55</sup>.

Other objections include queries concerning the number of approaches and their minimal interaction, the influence of philosophical and linguistic assumptions, and the ability of such approaches to add significantly to existing understanding rather than merely making Scripture obscure or

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<sup>54</sup>Edgar Krentz has criticised "the tendency to exalt historical criticism as the only legitimate way to read the Bible. The result is that the Bible becomes a specialist's book and is no longer the treasure of the church" - an Anabaptist-sounding concern: Krentz, Historical-Critical 71. See also Fiorenza, Bread 31-2; Wainwright, Beyond 9; Thiselton, Two 22; Wink, Bible 2; Bloesch: "A Christological Hermeneutic: Crisis and Conflict in Hermeneutics", in Johnston, Use 78; Goldingay: "Expounding the New Testament", in Marshall, New 356; and Sugirtharajah, Voices 3.

<sup>55</sup>Elizabeth Fiorenza concluded that "the questions explored by historical-literary biblical scholarship and those raised by believers and churches are often so disparate that it is sometimes impossible to 'apply' a historical-critical interpretation addressing questions of scholarship to a pastoral situation": Fiorenza, Bread 119. See also Maier, End 48.

expressing its meaning in unnecessarily arcane and complex terminology<sup>56</sup>. This renewed focus on presuppositional rather than exegetical issues suggests an enhancement of the potential contemporary significance of pre-critical approaches, such as Anabaptist hermeneutics, which address presuppositional issues.

The contribution of Anabaptist hermeneutics to this issue is neither unique nor complicated. But it does add a historical perspective to these objections, having raised some of them at a time when the scholarly domination of hermeneutics was just developing. This contribution consists in insisting that the historical-critical method, whatever its merits, be regarded as marginal, rather than central, to the task of biblical interpretation. It should not be dismissed as invalid or irrelevant<sup>57</sup>, but be treated as being of marginal interest. The questions addressed by historical criticism, in both its traditional and new forms, may assist in the interpretation of Scripture, but the assistance they provide will be of

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<sup>56</sup>Arthur Wainwright wrote: "The aim of scholarship is to make the Bible intelligible, but modern criticism in its attempt to clarify obscurities has constructed around the Scriptures a complex and intricate web of speculation from which the average reader retreats in bewilderment. In a large number of cases it is only speculation, and the basic message of a Scripture passage can be understood without it": Wainwright, Beyond 9. See also Maier, End 48; Rowland & Corner, Liberating 38.

<sup>57</sup>For positive appraisals of the historical-critical method from the Anabaptist tradition, see Swartley, Slavery 93-4; Yoder, From vii; Lind, Monotheism 13-4.

marginal rather than crucial importance<sup>58</sup>. Thus, a marginalised hermeneutics ironically provides the basis for the suggestion that the dominant methodology should itself be regarded as marginal.

The testimony of Anabaptist hermeneutics is that Scripture is best interpreted among the "people of God" as they listen to one another and to the Holy Spirit. The contribution of scholars to this process, not feasible in the sixteenth century, should be welcomed today, provided this contribution is subject to communal testing in the same way as all other contributions. Historical-critical tools need not be abandoned provided they are not given special status or unquestioned credence. In the hermeneutic community, neither scholars nor their historical-critical methods will be accorded the status to which they have been accustomed, as their conclusions, and even the validity of their questions, are open to challenge. But within the hermeneutic community, their contributions can be far more influential than is possible when scholars and congregations are operating independently.

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<sup>58</sup>A similar stance has been taken by Terence Keegan: "Any believing Christian can read the Bible and appreciate the Bible because the Bible does something to its readers. The role of the critic is primarily to explain how and why and in what way the Bible does what it does. Compared to the role of the readers, the role of critics is entirely secondary": Keegan, Interpreting 9-10. See also Longman, Literary 48. A more trenchant approach is adopted by Kenneth Hagen: "The usual survey of the historical-critical method is described with 'advance' language...As one author put it, going through the centuries, 'it finally won out !' What did it win, outside of control of academic biblical studies ? Did it win any new or better or clearer understanding of the text that was unavailable to St Augustine, Thomas, Luther or Calvin ?": Hagen, Bible 32-3. Anabaptists would perhaps use an adapted hagiography at this point and include Waldo, Menno and Marpeck, but they would sympathise with this critique. If it is exaggerated, perhaps such statements are needed to balance the excessive claims made by and for historical criticism.



## F. Anabaptist Hermeneutics and the Old Testament

An assessment of the contemporary significance of Anabaptist hermeneutics would be incomplete without a consideration of the issue of Old Testament interpretation. This issue has arisen in relation to various contemporary movements analysed in this study, and it is particularly relevant to the discussion of Constantinian influences in hermeneutics. The intention here is to investigate whether Anabaptist hermeneutics has any contemporary contribution to make to the development of a satisfactory hermeneutic of the Old Testament.

Anabaptist concerns about the misinterpretation and misuse of the Old Testament were frequently expressed in their debates with the Reformers. Similar concerns have been suggested as relevant to some contemporary approaches to the Old Testament. It has been argued that these concerns were and remain valid, and that failure to heed their warnings will continue to prejudice a proper understanding of the Old Testament and provide unwarranted biblical support for practices that are inappropriate under the new covenant.

It is less clear, however, that the Anabaptists offered a more adequate approach to Old Testament interpretation. The issues of the relationship between the Testaments and how the Old Testament should be applied were vigorously debated in the sixteenth century, but the solutions of neither the Reformers nor the Anabaptists appear satisfactory<sup>1</sup>. The continuing

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<sup>1</sup>See above at p181.

importance of the issues is acknowledged<sup>2</sup>, but satisfactory solutions remain elusive<sup>3</sup>. In this section, following a brief summary of contemporary approaches to these issues, the contention will be examined that while the primary contribution of Anabaptist hermeneutics is to clarify the issues involved and warn against illegitimate and inadequate solutions, their approach also contains elements that might assist in the development of a more satisfactory hermeneutic of the Old Testament. These elements were dismissed by the Reformers and have been neglected since, but the rehabilitation of other aspects of Anabaptist hermeneutics may result in their being examined afresh.

Contemporary approaches to these issues include the scholarly tendency to separate the Testaments, dealing independently with each and ignoring their inter-relationship<sup>4</sup>; the use of a promise/fulfilment model to

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<sup>2</sup>James Barr, for example, wrote: "The relations between these two [Old and New Testaments] generate some of the most fundamental and historically earliest questions of Christian theology". See Barr: "The Bible as a Document of Believing Communities", in Betz, Bible 42. And James Smart wrote: "Of all the problems that arise in interpretation, perhaps none is more basic than that of the unity of the Testaments": Smart, Interpretation 65.

<sup>3</sup>James Smart included the issue of the relationship between the Testaments among the "unanswered questions about biblical theology": Smart, Interpretation 16. Donald Carson wrote: "We urgently need some more creative thought on the relationships between the Testaments": Carson, Biblical 27. See also De Ridder, Richard: "The Old Testament Roots of Mission", in Shenk, Exploring 172.

<sup>4</sup>Although William LaSor has noted a change developing: "More and more, scholars have been devoting their attention to the relationship between the Old and New Testaments - after a long and somewhat sterile period when the two disciplines were handled as having little or no organic relationship". See LaSor: "The Sensus Plenior and Biblical Interpretation", in Gasque & LaSor, Scripture 260. See also Klassen, William: "The Relation of Old and New Covenant", in Dyck, Witness 371-2.

explain the relationship between the Testaments<sup>5</sup>; renewed interest in typology, carefully distinguished from allegory, to appropriate the Old Testament<sup>6</sup>; various forms of progressive revelation<sup>7</sup>; attempts to reclaim the Old Testament and apply its teachings literally<sup>8</sup>; a cross-cultural approach emphasising the unity of the Testaments and relevance of the Old Testament in non-Christendom cultures<sup>9</sup>; and popular approaches that rely on dispensational schemes or spiritualising, or ignore the Old Testament altogether<sup>10</sup>. With some of these approaches Anabaptist hermeneutics has little in common, but with others there is considerable common ground - in particular the promise/fulfilment model, the concept of progressive

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<sup>5</sup>Now popular among scholars, this model was common among the Anabaptists and developed most fully by Pilgram Marpeck. On contemporary endorsements (and some refinements) of this model, see Baker, Two 373; Clowney, Edmund P: "Interpreting the Biblical Models of the Church: A Hermeneutical Deepening of Ecclesiology", in Carson, Biblical 99; Smart, Interpretation 82; Fergusen, Biblical 100-1. On Marpeck's approach and contemporary significance, see Swartley, Slavery 141-2.

<sup>6</sup>Douglas Moo has commented: "In the last thirty years, typology has reemerged, after a period of relative neglect, as one of the most popular ways of explaining the relationship between the Testaments. Typology is set forth by many scholars as the key to understanding the New Testament use of the Old". See Moo: "The Problem of Sensus Plenior", in Carson & Woodbridge, Hermeneutics 183 See also Rogers & McKim, Authority 9; Stacey, Interpreting 42.

<sup>7</sup>See Fergusen, Biblical 100-1; Ramm, Protestant 102; Smart, Interpretation 79.

<sup>8</sup>The hermeneutics of Reconstructionism provide an example of this. See above at pp338-9. See also Baker, Two 151-2.

<sup>9</sup>See Kraft, Christianity 233-4, 299.

<sup>10</sup>Phyllis Bird has noted with disquiet that "the two-part canon which the church claimed in its repudiation of Marcion has been quietly replaced in most contemporary usage by a single Testament - and a highly simplified version of that": Bird, Bible 82.



revelation and the limited use of typology<sup>11</sup>.

Within the Latin American movements considered above, the Old Testament has been widely used, but there is little evidence that satisfactory solutions have been found to the underlying hermeneutical issues. In liberation hermeneutics, the Exodus story has been foundational and the Prophets' teaching on social justice greatly appreciated. The perceived marginalising and spiritualising of the Old Testament in European hermeneutics has been challenged<sup>12</sup> and the social, political and economic teaching of the Old Testament has been recovered. But different writers emphasise continuity or discontinuity between the Testaments<sup>13</sup>. Some insist that the New Testament takes precedence<sup>14</sup>. Others defend a more authoritative use of the Old<sup>15</sup>. The concerns raised by Anabaptist hermeneutics have not been adequately addressed. Within radical discipleship, a similar recovery of Old Testament teaching has occurred, and a similar refusal to spiritualise this<sup>16</sup>, although there has been greater

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<sup>11</sup>Although Anabaptist writings tend to use the term "allegory" rather than typology, a careful analysis of their practice in this area shows that they tended to use methods which would now be considered typological rather than allegorical.

<sup>12</sup>Carl Armerding has written: "Whereas traditional Christianity has consistently spiritualised the Old Testament promises, Gutierrez argues that their intensely political and material content must be retained". See Armerding: "Exodus: The Old Testament Foundation of Liberation", in Armerding, Evangelicals 51.

<sup>13</sup>Andrew Kirk has shown the contrast between the approaches of Miranda and Croatto at this point: see Kirk, Liberation 153ff.

<sup>14</sup>For example, Boff, Clodovis: "Hermeneutics: Constitution of Theological Pertinency", in Sugirtharajah, Voices 10.

<sup>15</sup>For example, Croatto, Biblical 81-2.

<sup>16</sup>See Scott, Bring 222; Dowley, Roger: Towards the Recovery of a Lost Bequest (London: ECUM, undated) para 38b.

emphasis on the essential unity of the Testaments and the Christological centre of Scripture<sup>17</sup>. The contemporary application of Old Testament norms and practices continues to be advocated, however, on the grounds that no preferable alternatives are available<sup>18</sup>. Anabaptist hermeneutics would argue that a Christocentric approach both outlaws this approach and provides a basis for a preferable alternative. Both movements have also deplored the marginalising of social issues resulting from an exclusive focus on the New Testament<sup>19</sup>.

Among charismatics, use of the Old Testament has been mainly devotional and doxological, the Psalms being especially popular, although certain Old Testament practices have been selected for literal application<sup>20</sup>. Among Restorationists, allegorical interpretation has been employed to discover Old Testament models of restoration, guidance for ecclesiology and eschatological insights. Other Old Testament practices have been added to those which many charismatics take literally<sup>21</sup>. The focus of this movement on the kingdom of God has drawn many back to the Old Testament. But little

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<sup>17</sup>See, for example, Padilla, Mission 81, 106; Escobar: "Our Hermeneutic Task Today", in Branson & Padilla, Conflict 5-6.

<sup>18</sup>See Dowley, Towards para 28a.

<sup>19</sup>See, for example, Boff, Church 59; Dowley, Towards para 49; Kirk, J Andrew: A New World Coming (Basingstoke: Marshalls, 1983) 48-9.

<sup>20</sup>For example, the use of dance, clapping and lifting up hands in worship.

<sup>21</sup>For example, the practice of tithing.

thought appears to have been given to hermeneutical issues<sup>22</sup>.

However, neither the literalistic use of the Old Testament in some of these movements, nor the spiritualistic approach in others, appears satisfactory. The diverse applications resulting from these methodologies<sup>23</sup> suggest a more adequate framework is needed for interpreting the Old Testament and relating it to the New.

Anabaptist hermeneutics rejected both the Reformers' tendency to apply the Old Testament literally and the Spiritualists' approach which, like some contemporary schemes, spiritualised it and made it mean whatever the interpreter wanted. The Anabaptists' own approach was deficient in that the Old Testament was effectively marginalised, but this approach contains elements that might provide clues in the search for contemporary solutions to these issues.

First, Anabaptists rejected Constantinian uses of the Old Testament, which involved equating Israel with Christendom and adopting Old Testament models for ethics and ecclesiology. The development of a non-Constantinian interpretation of the Old Testament is crucially important today. Anabaptist hermeneutics at least assists by identifying this issue. Scholarly and popular approaches to the Old Testament continue to be influenced by

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<sup>22</sup>Among charismatics and Restorationists, as among many other groups, the concept of Creation Ethics has been used to justify the literal application of some Old Testament texts. Problems remain, however, in determining what these actually require and how they are related to the teaching of Christ (as contemporary disputes over issues of gender demonstrate).

<sup>23</sup>And considerable mutual antagonism: see for example the criticisms of Ronald Sider's use of the Old Testament in Reconstructionist literature.



Constantinian presuppositions. This has arguably hindered a satisfactory solution to the issue of the relationship between the Testaments being found. The Anabaptist testimony here may help clear the ground for fresh approaches<sup>24</sup>.

Second, Anabaptists rejected a "flat Bible" approach, where every text is regarded as equally important and equally applicable, regardless of its context in Scripture as a whole, and insisted on a progressive and historical understanding of revelation. Progressive revelation has often been associated with liberal theology, and it has been assumed that this concept is incompatible with the principle of *sola scriptura*. Various forms of this concept have developed, and various objections have been made to it. James Smart has concluded: "The whole concept of progressive revelation is alive with contradictions. What it usually describes is not a progress in revelation but rather a progressive development of religious ideas and practices...The theory of progressive revelation breaks down because it necessitates an artificial structure of progressively higher levels of revelation, a scheme that does not correspond to the realities that confront us in the text of the Old Testament"<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup>"Mennonite biblical scholarship has seen a defect in typical European Protestant biblical interpretation - the inclination of biblical scholars to read the Old Testament through state church eyes, to see Israel as a state church or an instance of a state church": Marlin Jeschke, commenting on the work of Mennonite Old Testament scholar, Millard Lind. See Jeschke: "How Mennonites have done and should do Theology", in Swartley, Explorations 12-3. Both Lind and Jeschke have urged a "rereading of the Old Testament with fresh eyes".

<sup>25</sup>Smart, Interpretation 79. See also similar criticisms in Kraft, Christianity 233-6.

Hermeneutics in the Anabaptist tradition<sup>26</sup> offers a non-liberal version of progressive revelation that escapes many of these objections and may provide a useful approach to the relationship between the Testaments. The Anabaptist approach combined a clear commitment to *sola scriptura* with a commitment to the concept of progressive revelation. It emphasised the historical nature of revelation and allowed for the recognition of a sense of direction within Scripture.

John Yoder has described the Anabaptists' stance on the Testaments as "one of their century's few ways of focusing the historical character of revelation"<sup>27</sup>. Rather than looking for universal or propositional statements, Anabaptists gave attention to the historical circumstances in which revelation was received. Divorced from those circumstances such revelation might be misleading or inappropriate. The different historical expressions of the people of God in each Testament, for example, require careful examination of the implications of commands and promises given to them in

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<sup>26</sup>The model outlined here contains elements that contemporary Mennonite scholars have identified as underlying Anabaptist hermeneutics, but not elements that were necessarily clearly identified in the sixteenth century.

<sup>27</sup>EBI 28. "Should we assume with Zwingli", he asked, "that truth is ultimately timeless, so that there can be no changing in God's purposes from one age to the next, or do we understand God's purposes to be working themselves out through history so that a meaningful movement from the Old Testament to the New can be a fundamental part of God's plan?": EBI 26-7. See also Lind in EBI 152.

these Testaments<sup>28</sup>. Willard Swartley, noting Marpeck's thinking on this issue, insisted: "When God's dealings with humanity are under discussion, one cannot ignore the different circumstances in the different time periods"<sup>29</sup>. He concluded, "the distinction between historical time periods was quite fundamental to the Anabaptist view of Scripture"<sup>30</sup>.

This concept of development in revelation does not imply any change in God's character and ultimate purposes, nor does it necessitate constant forward movement. Rather, it sees God at work in history gradually revealing more of his character and purposes in situations where such revelation could be received. The focal point of this process is the Incarnation, but this does not consign all other aspects of revelation to irrelevance. The Anabaptist tradition offers an alternative view of revelation that succumbs neither to the static propositional assumptions of traditional Protestantism, nor to liberal assumptions about religious

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<sup>28</sup>John Yoder has written: "From the ancient Hebrews through the later prophets up to Jesus there was real historical movement, real 'progress', but the focus of this progress was not a changing of ethical codes but rather in an increasingly precise definition of the nature of peoplehood". See Yoder, John H: The Original Revolution (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971) 107.

<sup>29</sup>Swartley, Slavery 141. He continued: "The difference between the Testaments, therefore, must be attributed not to an essential change in God's moral will (contra Marcion) but to the essential historical difference between Old and New Testament times and places". This approach has none of the complexities of contemporary dispensational schemes, nor does it require the same emphasis on radical discontinuity between supposed different dispensations, but it does recognise that different texts relate to different historical contexts and possibilities.

<sup>30</sup>Swartley, Slavery 146.



evolution<sup>31</sup>. This has important implications for the relationship between the Testaments.

Although Anabaptists were wary of the Reformers' reliance on the "general drift" of Scripture<sup>32</sup>, they recognised a directional element in Scripture. Denny Weaver concluded that Anabaptists read Scripture "not as a flat series of propositions and timeless allegories, but with a sense of direction and development from Old Testament to New Testament"<sup>33</sup>. This enabled them to discern elements in the Old Testament that anticipated the new covenant, rather than consigning everything in the Old Testament to the old covenant. The Anabaptists' concern not to dilute the biblical text prevented them exploring this directional understanding very far, but it has been taken up by Willard Swartley, who has urged interpreters to "consider the directional factor in Scripture and thus avoid the 'flat Bible' trap. This includes considering the relationship of the Old and New Testaments. In what direction on a given point does the disclosure of

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<sup>31</sup>See Estep, Anabaptist 144; Davis, Anabaptism 24. Ben Ollenburger rejected the attempt to understand Anabaptists as proponents of progressive revelation, but he seems to have been thinking primarily of the liberal and evolutionary version: see EBI 52-3. William Klassen has suggested that Marpeck's approach combined an understanding of progression in God's dealings with humanity with an emphasis on the sovereignty of God: see EBI 39.

<sup>32</sup>For reasons outlined above at pp101-3.

<sup>33</sup>Weaver, Becoming 118.

The contribution of Anabaptist hermeneutics to the interpretation of the Old Testament, therefore, is important but partial. Some interesting parallels between Anabaptist thinking and scholarly approaches suggest that their treatment of this issue was less inadequate than has sometimes been assumed. Their warnings about the need to interpret the Old Testament in a way that neither jeopardises the centrality of Christ, nor endorses a discredited and increasingly anachronistic Constantinianism, are timely. But the reclaiming of the Old Testament and its radical message, to which contemporary "marginal" movements are contributing, adds an important dimension to Anabaptist hermeneutics. This is something contemporary Mennonite scholars have been urging, and to which they are contributing<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup>Swartley, in his Conrad Grebel lecture 31/10/79 entitled "How then shall we read the Bible ?" There are similarities between this approach and that of Jurgen Moltmann, who has written: "the key to the hermeneutics of the historic witness of the Bible is the 'future of Scripture'...if we are to understand the biblical scriptures in their proclamation, their understanding of existence and their understanding of the world, we must look in the same direction as they themselves do": Moltmann, Theology 283.

<sup>35</sup>Waldemar Janzen concluded: "While the early Anabaptists de-emphasized the Old Testament so as not to be detained by it from radical Messianic obedience, modern Mennonites (and others) avoid it so as not to allow it to disturb their inner tranquillity. For the Anabaptists, a radical New Testament orientation meant costly obedience and persecution; for moderns it means a more undisturbed, soothing religion of psychological well-being". See Janzen: "A Canonical Rethinking of the Anabaptist Mennonite New Testament Orientation", in Huebner, Church 95. See also Lind, Monotheism 14; Finger, Thomas: "Is 'Systematic Theology' Possible from a Mennonite Perspective ?", in Swartley, Explorations 47.

## G. Conclusion

Anabaptist hermeneutics is a neglected resource, but a resource with potential to challenge and enrich contemporary hermeneutical discussion and the interpretive practice of diverse Christian groups. Its rediscovery will enable it to contribute in several ways to contemporary biblical interpretation: providing parallels from the sixteenth century that enable contemporary interpreters both to explore the roots of the dominant European hermeneutical approach and to gain fresh perspectives on issues that this approach has failed to address satisfactorily; providing further parallels for such diverse groups as liberation theologians and the charismatic movement that both endorse their hermeneutical insights and suggest ways of refining these; and offering a potential interface to enable the hermeneutical insights of these diverse groups to be shared and appreciated.

Contrary to conventional wisdom that has dismissed Anabaptist hermeneutics as derivative, unsophisticated and of marginal significance even in the sixteenth century, Anabaptism possessed an coherent (though not univocal), distinctive and sophisticated hermeneutic that was influential in its own generation and has further contributions to make today. On several issues that were important in the sixteenth century and remain important in the twentieth it offers perspectives that assist in clarifying, and even resolving, difficulties: these include the relationship between the Testaments, the relationship between interpretation and application, and the interpretive ministry of the Holy Spirit.

As well as offering fresh insights on these issues, Anabaptist hermeneutics insists on the retention of two elements that are in constant danger



of being marginalised: the enfranchisement of the whole people of God as biblical interpreters, and the hermeneutic community as the context within which interpretation should be carried out. These distinguished Anabaptist hermeneutics in the sixteenth century and continue to challenge contemporary hermeneutical approaches. The disenfranchising tendencies of the global community within radical discipleship, of the ideological influence of liberation theologians in the base communities, and of authoritative prophets in charismatic groups have all been identified through comparison with Anabaptist hermeneutics, a hermeneutic with much in common with these movements, *but a more authentic* movement of ordinary believers than any of them. With regard to the concept of the hermeneutic community, the Anabaptist model has been found relevant to contemporary concerns about communal interpretation in both scholarly and Third World hermeneutics. The sixteenth century model it offers may not in itself be adequate for a twentieth century communal hermeneutic, but this same model does indicate essential features of a communal hermeneutic that might otherwise be marginalised, features related primarily to its "believers' church" type of ecclesiology.

This ecclesiology is closely connected with the other distinctive and important feature of Anabaptist hermeneutics that has been of significance in every section of this assessment of its contemporary significance: its identification and rejection of all forms of Constantinianism. The pervasive influence of Constantinian presuppositions have been identified, on the basis of comparisons with sixteenth century parallels, not only in dominant European hermeneutical principles and practices but also, in transmuted form, in liberation theology and radical discipleship. Anabap-

tist sensitivity on this issue provides a helpful filter through which contemporary hermeneutical principles and practices can be passed to be checked for Constantinian elements.

The ability of Anabaptist hermeneutics to act as a filter in this way and also to contribute helpfully to such diverse groups as liberation theology and the charismatic movement is testimony to the breadth and vigour of this sixteenth century approach to biblical interpretation. The unusual heritage of Anabaptism may enable it not only to contribute to such diverse groups but also to enable them to learn from each other by discovering common ground both with Anabaptism and with each other. As a charismatic but biblically-based marginalised European movement of the poor, it has the potential to act as a bridge between Third World, charismatic and scholarly European hermeneutics. Ironically for a movement regarded as sectarian, Anabaptist hermeneutics has unusual ecumenical potential. It is neither Catholic nor Protestant. It is as Christocentric as liberal theology, but as committed to *sola scriptura* as evangelicals. It has become a conversation-partner with both liberation theology and radical discipleship, and yet also has an emphasis on the Spirit that charismatics appreciate.

Anabaptist hermeneutics is neither total nor adequate. In this study, hermeneutical insights from other movements have been suggested as helpful in enhancing or building on Anabaptist approaches. But the rehabilitation of Anabaptist hermeneutics will enable it to assist in the reassessment of the role of scholarly hermeneutics, to contribute neglected insights to contemporary hermeneutical discussions, to safeguard the hermeneutical enfranchisement of millions of ordinary Christians, to continue warning

about the distorting effects of Constantinian thinking on biblical interpretation, to help contemporary "marginal" groups develop and refine their hermeneutics, to testify to the Christocentric and progressive character of Scripture, and to play its part in the emergence of a contemporary expression of communal hermeneutics.



A Anabaptism

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